



An Analysis of Love Between Heathcliff and Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* from the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism

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Abstract. *Wuthering Heights*, a novel by Emily Bronte, one of the famous Bronte sisters, tells a tragic story of love and hate between two main characters, Catherine and Heathcliff. In this book, the hero Heathcliff not only has a sincere and passionate love for the heroine Catherine, but also has strong ambition in jealousy and revenge. The contradictory and complicated tragic love story between Heathcliff and Catherine makes *Wuthering Heights* become a masterpiece in English literature. Using the theory of ethical literary criticism, this paper analyzes the love tragedy of these two characters and expounds the causes of the tragedy on the basis of studying Heathcliff's ethical identity.

Keywords: *Wuthering Heights* · love · Heathcliff · Catherine · ethical literary criticism

1 Introduction

This paper is mainly composed of three chapters: The first chapter introduces the theory of ethical literary criticism, and explains the relevant methodologies and concepts in this theory. The second chapter focuses on the analysis of the transformation of the love between two protagonists, mainly divided into three stages: innocent love, wavering love, and tragic love. The third chapter mainly analyzes the reasons leading to this love tragedy, focusing on the analysis of the confusion of Heathcliff's ethical identity, as well as the family and social ethical reasons that prevent him and Catherine from being a happy couple.

2 Theoretical Framework

Ethical Literary Criticism is the criticism to promote the harmonious coexistence of human beings from the point of literary view (Liu, 2005: 21). It was put forward by Professor Nie Zhenzhao in 2004. This argumentation is a way of criticism and a combination invented by Chinese scholars who learned from western ethical criticism and

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Chinese moral criticism. What's more, this argumentation uses ethical view to explain and evaluate different kinds of people's choices, processes and results (Nie, 2004: 16). So in this way we can obtain some moral instruction and inspiration given by ethical choice in history and present. Ethical literary criticism is a method of literary criticism with the characteristics of methodology. It requires the researchers to restore the ethical and moral phenomena of the society on the basis of close reading of the text. It focuses on the study of the historical significance of literature from the perspective of ethics in order to realize the return of the ethical and moral value of literature and provide a positive referential value for today's society.

3 Love Between Heathcliff and Catherine

The love story between Heathcliff and Catherine in the novel is the most attracting and unforgettable part. Different from ordinary love stories, their love is inconceivable. The love between them undergoes three stages, which we will analyze in this chapter.

3.1 Innocent Love: Mental Twins

In their childhood, Heathcliff and Catherine are a perfect match because they have common interests and pursuits. During that time, Heathcliff is wild and persistent, feeling furious pride, unrestrained and uninhibited. He just has several special traits, compared to other people, but is still a naïve young man who loves a young woman sincerely. It is important to note that Catherine is not a miss in the traditional sense who is quiet and obedient but a crazy girl with wild personality (Duckett, 2019: 326). Catherine makes many references to her spiritual and spiritual unity with Heathcliff. She wanders on the desolate wilderness with Heathcliff every day. They are sloppy, casual, unrestrained, stubborn and naughty. For this, they hit it off.

3.2 Wavering Love: Catherine's Choice

During their teenage years, their love wavers as their shared pursuit has gone. As they grow older, they have to go their separate ways for the reason that Catherine has been tamed into a "good girl" in the traditional sense, wanting to be a good wife and mother under the ethical and moral constraints; Heathcliff, however, refuses to be tamed and turned into an aggressive "beast" against the social rules (McKinstry, 1985:145). The pursuit of the two is changed, and the common interests are no longer there. As a result, their love waver inevitably.

3.3 Tragic Love: Heathcliff's Revenge

In middle age, Heathcliff's love affair with Catherine ends in tragedy. If Heathcliff didn't come back, their story would have been over long ago, and would not involve more people in this more regrettable end. When Catherine decides to marry Linton, she has already changed. She is domesticated by ethical and secular concepts. To this kind of change, Catherine is full of conflict and pain. She marries Edgar, the representative

of civilization, but is still deeply attached to Heathcliff and unwilling to part with him, for he always reminds her of her unfettered boyhood. Catherine is the domesticated Heathcliff, and Heathcliff is the undomesticated Catherine. After the reunion, the two people seem to have a long-lost agreement in the name of love: as a wife and mother, Catherine couldn't let go of her attachment to Heathcliff and still entangles with him. Heathcliff, too, is deeply in love with Catherine, even though he is married. The two seem to have common interests, but at that moment the unity is against ethics and morality. There is an impassable gap between reality and desire, which is the constraint of ethics. Unethical love stories are doomed to end in tragedy.

4 The Analysis of Causes of the Love Tragedy by

4.1 Ethical Literary Criticism

As an individual in a social group, Heathcliff is full of hatred for all the people around him, except for Catherine, whom he might even lay down his life. Catherine is his soul in the world, his whole being. Even though Catherine has betrayed Heathcliff, she still loves him from the bottom of her heart. So what is it that prevents their love from reaching a happy ending? After learning about the definition of ethical literature criticism and especially the third part of its three methodologies in Chapter one, I find there are three main aspects lying in the answer to the question why these two can't be together. They are respectively Heathcliff's confusion of ethical identity tragedy, family ethical tragedy, and social class ethical tragedy.

4.2 Heathcliff's Confusion of Ethical Identity Tragedy

During Heathcliff's lifetime, he has many identities: a foundling, an adopted son, a lover, a husband, and a father. He is always painfully lost in other identities; only when being Catherine's lover, he is happy. However, the possibility of their love tragedy is also increasing in the process of changing the ethical identity and pursuing the lover identity. Heathcliff loses this identity when Catherine gets married. It can be said that Heathcliff's search for his identity, especially the identity of lover, directly leads the relationship between him and Catherine to be much more complicated, forming ethical chaos. The new ethical relationship between him and the Lintons of Thrushcross Grange makes their romance more morally unacceptable. To search for love, which all but makes love become more impossible, Heathcliff creates new ethical identities and loses himself in confusion of ethical identities, enhancing the possibility of the love tragedy between them.

4.3 Family Ethical Tragedy

The most obvious reason that Heathcliff and Catherine couldn't be together is the objection from family. Almost everyone in Wuthering Heights except old Mr Earnshaw thinks that Heathcliff possesses nothing, and thus has no right to be with Catherine. Not only Heathcliff but also Catherine is in a dilemma. Catherine's trouble is that although she

loves Heathcliff, she still decides to get married with Linton. Though she clearly knows from the bottom of her heart that it is a wrong choice to marry Linton, she is compelled to do so, for Linton is the only man who is capable of matching her rank and fortune in her little world. However, it would be a shame in the eyes of the world if she gets married to Heathcliff. The second and most important point is that the love affair is highly incompatible with the family ethical environment at that time. In the case of Heathcliff, after he comes to Wuthering Heights, he has been old Earnshaws' adopted son, Hindley and Catherine's brother. There is an ethical brother-sister relationship between them. Although they are not related by blood, they are still siblings in name. Love between brother and sister is not permitted. Even if only old Earnshaw acknowledges Heathcliff's adoptive son status, which the others don't approve of, it is an indisputable fact in the work. It is clear that neither Heathcliff nor Catherine understands their ethical identity, which is a very important reason why they cannot be together during their lives.

4.4 Social Ethical Tragedy

Heathcliff and Catherine's behavior cannot be acceptable to the grounds of common sense and social ethics. As an adopted son, Heathcliff's identity is never recognized and accepted from the very beginning. During their time at Wuthering Heights, Heathcliff and Catherine are indulged in their own world for a long time, living and growing freely and happily. Until one day, Thrushcross Grange appears in their lives, and it is then that they realize that there is a different life in the world. They go to different directions further and further away. Even though Catherine chooses to get married with Linton, Heathcliff still intervenes in Catherine's marriage. In order to take revenge on Linton for taking away his lover, he marries Linton's sister, and pesters Linton's wife, which is undoubtedly against ethics and morality in the 19th century in England. Heathcliff's such behavior is a reflection that he has no morals as a social being. Meanwhile, Heathcliff brings a new obstacle between him and Catherine in the process of achieving his desire through revenge, which has both ethical and moral factors. No matter what Heathcliff's status is, as a brother who should keep his nominal sister at arm's length in a family or as a person who should be responsible in the society, their love would not be allowed in the real world under any circumstances. What's more, his revenge raises the ethical barriers of their love.

5 Conclusion

Heathcliff and Catherine's love is tragic and unethical. It's necessary and significant to discuss their love story from the perspective of ethical literature criticism for the reason that the duty of Ethical Literary Criticism is by using critical terms as a tool to analyze and explain the literary text, especially for doing some research about the characters or the plots that a story presents, and then finding the ethical values and ethical inclination that hide behind them, and as a result, giving society and human beings some ethical cautions and instructions (Nie, 2006: 8). In the real world, the love between Heathcliff and Catherine are doomed to have an unhappy ending because of the barriers between their ethical identities. However, in the world of love, there are no orphans, no husbands,

no fathers, only lovers. With their death, their ethical identity disappears, and their love is finally fulfilled.

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