Heathcliff: A Tragic Protagonist — A Marxist Villain or Both?

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Abstract

Heathcliff, whose moral and social identity defies simple classification, provides one of the most intricate character analyses in the nineteenth-century fiction. This paper explores whether Heathcliff is better viewed as a Marxist villain influenced by class conflict and capitalist ambition, or as a tragic figure in the Aristotelian and Byronic traditions. By fulfilling the framework of hamartia, peripeteia, and eventual anagnorisis, Heathcliff's early deprivation, deep and unwavering affection for Catherine, and self-destructive fixation on revenge evoke sympathy and terror in the reader from a tragic perspective. His tragic picture as a Byronic hero is further enhanced by his isolation, brooding defiance, and opposition to traditional morality. Through financial manipulation, exploitation, and the subversion of feudal systems, Heathcliff's journey from marginalized orphan to property-owning master serves as an example of a rebellious challenge to the established rural aristocracy from a Marxist perspective. However, his rise is not revolutionary in the broadest sense; his goals are based on personal grudges, and his strategies reinforce rather than overthrow the oppressive systems he was subjected to. Using both perspectives, the study makes the case that Heathcliff becomes a complex character whose personal tragedy and class-based hostility are inextricably connected. Heathcliff will always be relevant as a critique of the cyclical nature of social dominance and a symbol of destructive desire since Brontë refuses to define his character within a single moral framework.

Keywords: Byronic Hero, Heathcliff, Marxist Criticism, Tragic Protagonist, *Wuthering Heights.*

1. Introduction

Set in the wild moors of northern England, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) [1] centers on the erratic figure of Heathcliff — an adoptive outsider whose destructive revenge and compulsive desire make it hard to categorize him as a hero, villain, tragic protagonist, or revolutionary. His complexity highlights how social structure and the human psyche are intertwined. Using two critical perspectives, this paper examines Heathcliff as a Marxist villain whose ruthless social tactics reveal class conflict and as a tragic or Byronic hero molded by excessive emotion. The combination of these viewpoints shows how closely class-driven vengeance and Heathcliff's tragic desires are related.

The characteristics of the Romantic and Gothic tragic hero—emotional intensity, rebellion, and estrangement—are all exhibited by Heathcliff. He fits the Byronic archetype: "A man proud, moody, cynical, with defiance on his brow and misery in his heart… implacable in revenge, yet capable of deep and strong affection" because of his

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unwavering love for Catherine, which transcends societal boundaries.[2] Heathcliff's emotional landscape can be encapsulated in this description: alienated and hated, yet able to experience sublime love. Critical evaluations also connect him to the Byronic archetype: the withdrawn, troubled individual whose charisma and intelligence coexist with self-destruction.[3] His tragic complexity is further reinforced by his moral ambiguity, ability to both fascinate and destroy, which goes beyond traditional moral dichotomies.[4] He is a complex and fascinating character – engaging and captivating, passionate – and his life is driven by emotions that ultimately result in self-destruction.

In addition, a Marxist interpretation places Heathcliff in the context of social and economic power structures. Early nineteenth-century capitalism and feudal order are reflected in his transition from a marginalized orphan to a property-owning master. Using property acquisition, financial manipulation, and strategic marriage, he subverts the landed gentry while perpetuating inequality. His rise, as argued by Terry Eagleton [5] and Arnold Kettle,[6] represents both class conflict and individual ambitions, demonstrating how finances, love and revenge, intertwine to challenge long-standing structures.

The limitations of traditional critical categories are exposed by Heathcliff's dual identities as a sad figure and a disruptive agent. While his quest for supremacy makes any heroic or revolutionary interpretation more difficult, his emotional extremes evokes fear and sympathy. This study, which is framed by both Aristotelian-Byronic tragedy and Marxist critique, argues that Heathcliff represents the struggle between individual ambition and institutional limitation, wherein psychological suffering and social setting are mutually constitutive.

The paper proceeds in three steps: first, it analyzes Heathcliff through Aristotelian and Byronic models of tragedy to trace his *hamartia, peripeteia*, and *anagnorisis*. Next, it evaluates his manipulation, property schemes, and class antagonism using a Marxist lens. Finally, it integrates these readings to demonstrate how social hostility and personal anguish form a dual identity shaped by both material and emotional forces. As a result, the study places *Wuthering Heights* in the context of a novel that examines the relationship between love, revenge, and power; consequently, Heathcliff serves as a lens for examining the morality, class, and agency in Victorian literature.

To this end, the study poses the following question: How does Heathcliff fit into the concepts of tragedy proposed by Aristotle and Byron? What aspects of class struggle and capitalist ambition are reflected in his social mobility and retaliation? And how does the intersection of Marxist and tragic readings illuminate his enduring complexity? These questions guide an examination into Heathcliff's ongoing significance as a figure embodying the conflict between individual suffering and systemic power.

2. Literature Review
Heathcliff continues to divide reviewers and academics. Discussions are dominated by two main interpretive frameworks: Heathcliff as a Marxist or class-struggle figure, and Heathcliff as the archetypal Byronic or tragic hero. This literature review assesses well-known figures from both interpretive traditions, pointing out areas of overlap and inconsistency as well as prospects for a more complex synthesis.

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Heathcliff is the most resonant example of the Byronic hero notion, which originated in Lord Byron's Romantic writings. Heathcliff is quite similar to Macaulay's well-known portrayal of him as "a man proud, moody, cynical, with defiance on his brow and misery in his heart; … implacable in revenge, yet capable of deep and strong affection."[7] According to Silviya Y, Heathcliff exemplifies all of the main characteristics of this archetype, including moral ambiguity, emotional intensity, mystery, and vindictive passion. The Byronic mold is reinforced by his outsider roots and his compulsive love for Catherine, which drive him to seek revenge and destroy himself.[8]

van Zeldert compares Heathcliff and Rochester highlighting the archetype's fundamental Byronic traits, which include spiritualized love and defiance of authority.[9] Fahim Salman's study echoes the typology of "man proud, cynical, moody," also emphasizes Heathcliff's moral isolation and "dark characteristics".[10]

By placing Heathcliff in a Gothic-vengeful tradition and examining how his story fits with Byronic deadly revenge and supernatural longing, Mary Haden's thesis broadens the focus.[11] According to these interpretations, Heathcliff is a tragic character who is entangled with moral and emotional extremes. According to Chialant (2015), Heathcliff represent the sad irresolution of the Byronic hero, seeking either oblivion or an unattainable reunion with his loved ones.[12] Heathcliff as a Byronic character—morally dubious, lonely, and tormented—similar to Rochester in *Jane Eyre*.[13]

Another interpretive tradition situates Heathcliff in the context of class conflict and social cataclysm. According to Arnold Kettle, *Wuthering Heights* represents the struggle between the gentry who control land and the growing economic forces. Using capitalist strategies to topple established property hierarchies, Heathcliff's acquisition of property—through the exploitation of Hindley's vice and a deceptive marriage to Isabella—is presented as class retaliation.[14] Terry Eagleton supports this stance by viewing Catherine's social decision between Heathcliff and Edgar as an example of class ideology in action. Her rejection of Heathcliff is explained by the comfort of her social status rather than a lack of love, exposing the class-structured nature of power and love.[15]

Zhou (2023) uses the wind as a motif to further Marxist symbolism. Similar to the collapse of the peasant class under capitalism, Heathcliff is compared as a revolutionary wind: strong, turbulent, but eventually waning after his death.[16] A feminist-class twist is added by Gilbert and Gubar (1979), who see Heathcliff's disruptive power and lack of ancestry as a violation of patriarchal conventions, essentially representing feminine-coded resistance against patriarchal bourgeois structures.[17]

Despite their differences, these interpretive traditions also have illuminating points of intersection. Though they have differing interpretations of its origins, both Byronic and Marxist perspectives highlight Heathcliff's retaliation. Marxist interpretations see it as a class uprising through self-interest, whereas Byronic interpretations see it as emotion-driven self-destruction. Both frameworks—class alienation in Marxist philosophy and romantic alienation in Byronic tradition—center on Heathcliff's internal and external isolation. The pyrrhic victory of Heathcliff is mentioned in both accounts. The tragic conclusion reveals class rebellion to be emotionally and morally bankrupt, fulfilling the Byronic fate. His Gothic seclusion is reflected in the ethereal moors, while class turmoil is reflected in the shifting property. Both schools of thought recognize the significance of symbolic and environmental circumstances.

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Despite insightful individual observations, the literature frequently falls short in combining Heathcliff's socioeconomic and psychological aspects. Few works successfully combine the class-based mechanics of his ascension with the emotional intensity of his sad journey. Combining these components could result in a more thorough picture, one that acknowledges how his class goals destroy his emotional core and how his emotional damage feeds his class-driven revenge.

Two prominent but contrasting interpretive pathways emerge from the secondary writing on Heathcliff: the Marxist/class-struggle figure and the Byronic/tragic hero. Each adds something insightful, from Eagleton's Marxist perspective to Silviya's Byronic emphasis. The most interesting interpretations, however, are found where these viewpoints converge, shedding light on Heathcliff's twin identities as a socioeconomic disruptor and an emotionally troubled person. More thorough integration of these dimensions in future research could be beneficial, as it reflects the novel's own inability to easily classify its main character.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper analyzes Heathcliff's nuanced characterization in *Wuthering Heights* using a dual theoretical framework that combines literary tragedy and Marxist criticism. Heathcliff is a perfect example of the traditional components of *hamartia, peripeteia*, and *anagnorisis* from the standpoint of Aristotelian tragedy because of his self-destructive decisions, moral ambiguity, and obsessive passion for Catherine, which inspire both pity and fear. By emphasizing Heathcliff's emotional intensity, social defiance, and existential isolation, the Byronic model strengthens this analysis even more and establishes him as a character whose grandeur and rebellion underline the psychological and ethical aspects of his tragedy.

Marxist critique, in addition to the tragic perspective, sheds light on the socioeconomic aspects of Heathcliff's transformation from a marginalized orphan to a property-owning master. Class conflict and capitalist ambition are reflected in his quest for wealth and social power, but his personal grudges and dubious tactics imply that his achievement serves to strengthen rather than to topple the repressive systems he challenges. This perspective places Heathcliff's deeds in the larger historical and material context of rural England in the nineteenth century.

Combining these approaches allows the study to envision Heathcliff as a dual character whose socioeconomic hostility and personal tragedy are inextricably associated. Heathcliff's lasting significance as a character whose identity cannot be reduced to a single moral or social category is demonstrated by the integration of Aristotelian-Byronic and Marxist frameworks, which enables a nuanced understanding of how Brontë examines the relationship between desire, morality, and systemic inequality.

4. Discussion

At the moral and emotional core of *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff is a persistently perplexing character whose complexity resists easy categorization. His character functions at the nexus of the political and the personal, where the ruthlessness of social hierarchy and the turbulence of desire meet. This discussion shows how Brontë blends psychological suffering with class consciousness by interpreting Heathcliff as both a tragic, Byronic hero and a Marxist antagonist. By doing this, the study reveals how

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Heathcliff's material fight for power and his emotional agony are inextricably connected, implying that his class reversal motivated by retaliation eventually destroys the same humanity it seeks to defend.

The discussion moves forward in three phases to examine these interconnected dimensions. In order to show how passion and suffering create Heathcliff's tragic arc, it first examines critical perspectives on the Byronic hero and Aristotelian tragedy through in-depth analyses of formative events, such as his early humiliation at Wuthering Heights, his intense bond with Catherine, and his decline into destructive isolation. In order to examine how Heathcliff's economic rise and manipulation of class structures—through property accumulation, exploitative marriages, and the dispossession of heirs—mirror the contradictions of emergent capitalism, it employs Marxist critical frameworks, drawing on the works of Arnold Kettle, Terry Eagleton, and related theorists. Lastly, it combines these perspectives to contend that Heathcliff's mental desolation and his desire for retribution against social tyranny are inextricably linked, as his rebellion perpetuates the very hierarchies he is trying to topple.

Wuthering Heights ultimately portrays Heathcliff as an epicenter of persistent contradiction—a tragic figure characterized by class exploitation and a revolutionary plagued by vengeance—rather than as a problem that needs to be solved. Brontë's greatest realization stems from his irresolution: that the human predicament, trapped in inequality and desire, defies any tidy moral or ideological resolution.

4.1. A Tragic Protagonist

The remarkable characteristics of the Byronic archetype—passionate, brooding, ethically dubious, and emotionally estranged—are personified by Heathcliff. Mentioning his orphanage upbringing, inner upheaval, defiance, and reluctance to follow social standards. Silviya asserts that Heathcliff "fits this mold in a way that enhances his role in *Wuthering Heights,*"[18]

His strong bond with Catherine, which transcends reason and social conventions, serves as the foundation for his Byronic heroism. Once Catherine marries Edgar Linton for his social status, breaking their youthful bond, Heathcliff becomes resentful and vengeful. This emotional breakdown gives the novel a tragic gravity as Heathcliff's devotion becomes his fatal flaw, turning loyalty into a self-destructive obsession.

The declaration, "Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same" (Brontë, 2003),[19] underscores Heathcliff's deep emotional attachment to Catherine, which functions as his *hamartia*. His obsessive passion transforms into self-destructive behavior and cruelty toward others, including Isabella, Hareton, and Cathy Linton, reflecting his *peripeteia*. Finally, Heathcliff's death, described as "the intense horror of nightmare, and the recollection of Catherine's face… seemed to chill his very heart" (Brontë, 2003),[20] exemplifies *anagnorisis*: too late recognition of the consequences of his obsession and revenge, marking the culmination of his tragic arc.

The tragedy is intensified by moral ambiguity. Heathcliff's emotional traumas explain why he becomes so tormented and so obsessed with tormenting others. Heathcliff's cruelty—to Isabella, Hareton, and Cathy—is frightening but mitigated by his suffering. Tragic complexity lies in this dichotomy: passionate anguish is inextricably linked to predatory malice. He hovers between the extremes of feeling; he is neither completely

evil nor completely empathetic. Heathcliff is described as a "tortured antihero whose all-consuming rage, jealousy, and anger destroy both him and those around him,"[21] perfectly capturing this dichotomy. Classical tragedy is characterized by his self-inflicted and external destruction.

Heathcliff's journey, from abused orphan to owned but pained landowner, traces a terrible progression. His story can be mapped across the three main components of tragedy: *hamartia, peripeteia*, and *anagnorisis*. His obsessive commitment to Catherine (his *hamartia*) boosts a reversal (*peripeteia*) from powerless outsider to agent of cruelty and domination, culminating in an unattainable recognition or tragedy (*anagnorisis*) that arrives too late, as Catherine is already dead and his own emotional core hollowed out.

The melancholic tendency is highlighted by Heathcliff's terminal decline. He becomes "hideously worldly yet… a poet's vision of Catherine's ghost,"[22] and his desecration of her tomb arouses both horror and sorrow. His final days—withdrawn, troubled, and aimless—indicate that seeking revenge has eventually resulted in an empty victory for the soul.

4.2. A Marxist Villain

Heathcliff's journey from despised outsider to property-owning master parallels his tragic arc and reads like a somber tale of class struggle. His tale serves as a social critique, particularly when viewed from a Marxist perspective. The early 19th-century capitalism forces change in the agricultural environment, which was a conventional feudal or peasant community. Using strategies typical of capitalist class dominance, such as debt, marriage-based property acquisition, and expropriation, Heathcliff rises from servant to master in the community. Heathcliff uses "the classic methods of the ruling class, expropriation and property deals" to take control of Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights, according to Marxist critic Arnold Kettle, who calls *Wuthering Heights* "a symbolic representation of the class system of 19th-century England".[23] As a result, Heathcliff represents revolutionary disruption in the rural class system.

Terry Eagleton argues that Catherine's decision between Edgar and Heathcliff reflects class-based ideological considerations rather than personal temperament.[24] In fact, Catherine choose Edgar for stability rather than just love, demonstrating how marriage and social standing are arenas for class conflict.

The class-struggle narrative is made more intense by Marxist interpretations. Heathcliff's brutal overthrow of the status quo represents a revolution — the effective suppression of upper orders by a lower class. The novel is a combination of tragedy and revolutionary change, signifying dictatorship of the proletariat in the face of aristocratic downfall. In a similar vein, interpretations of the wind imagery see Heathcliff as a Gothic storm that upends the established order, symbolizing the power of the peasant class and its revolutionary potential despite its inherent instability.

Sevenov (2023) describes Heathcliff as an enigmatic figure defined by his obsessive love for Catherine and his gradual descent into vengeful darkness.[25] His methodical retaliation, which included using Hindley's gambling to take control of Wuthering Heights, marrying Isabella to obtain Thrushcross Grange, and pressuring his son to marry Cathy Linton in order to consolidate power—all of which were supported by strategic class maneuvering. As Brontë notes, Heathcliff "turned the tables on Hindley;

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every means of annoyance was employed" (Brontë, 2003),[26] illustrating how structural control is adopted for personalized ends. The effects are devastating: Isabella is emotionally ruined, Hareton is denied education, and the estates are instruments of domination.

This tactic reflects what Terry Eagleton[27] and Arnold Kettle[28] explain in Marxist analyses of the novel: expropriation, debt leverage, and marriage alliances are some of the classic methods of the ruling class that Heathcliff uses to challenge long-standing hierarchies, but he is stuck in imitation rather than mass uprising. Heathcliff uses the instruments of power to exact revenge, but he never frees anyone; instead, he substitutes one kind of oppression for another. Heathcliff's rise is thus both revolutionary in appearance and oppressive in practice.

The effects are incapacitating. Isabella endured heartless treatment, animals were injured, and defenseless heirs like Hareton were denied an education and turned into submissive pawns. Heathcliff's retaliation is both structural and personal; he creates structures of social control that are a twisted reenactment of the class relations that previously harmed him.

However, despite this Machiavellian sweep, he is not satisfied with his achievement. His obsession with Catherine transcends her death, and his reign of power only serves to increase the suffering around him, paving the way for his meaningless death.

4.3. Revenge Fueled by Psychological Trauma

The combination of class uprising and emotional destruction is what ties the tragic and Marxist readings together. Heathcliff's social and economic strategies are inseparable from his psychological trauma. Childhood mistreatment by Hindley and rejection by Catherine produce deep resentment and a desire for revenge. The novel records, "Whatever he did, he pursued it with a vindictive perseverance that terrified all around him" (Brontë, 2003),[29] illustrating how early emotional wounds fuel social hostility. Mistreatment during childhood fosters resentment and rage, which serve as the catalyst for his planned comeback.[30] The drive to upheaval that arises from emotional pain is twisted and self-serving.

Although Heathcliff's persistent sadness for Catherine complicates his deceptive behavior and emotional detachment. These traits mimic psychopathy and hint more toward trauma-induced wrath than innate evil.[31] Thus, his deliberate brutality is linked to his psychological wounds; his retaliation is both a weapon and a wound.

Because of his horrific upbringing, Heathcliff is supposed to be empathetic, however he also has an emotional bond with demonstrably awful people. The methodological contradiction is reflected in this: we condemn Heathcliff while also feeling sorry for him.

4.4. Intersection of Tragedy and Class Uprising

Heathcliff is undoubtedly evil, yet his evil is defined as a class uprising manifested via individual revenge. He disrupts the established order, which makes him both subversive and oppressive, but he does not completely destroy social structure; instead, he weaponizes it. The friction created by these two interpretations — tragic hero and Marxist villain — is prolific. Personal misery becomes the catalyst for social unrest as Heathcliff's severe emotional suffering feeds his class-targeted retaliation. However, this rebellion is very personal, reinforces oppression rather than ends it, and is neither

collective nor emancipatory. Heathcliff consequently turns into a morally dubious character who exists at the nexus of socioeconomic revolt and psychological suffering.

The limitations of traditional critical categories are highlighted by this duality. Marxist critique necessitates examining power and social structure, whereas romantic tragedy involves sympathetic involvement with emotional extremes. Although he partially satisfies neither, Heathcliff symbolizes both. While his sad story evokes fear and sympathy, his social deception elicits introspection and rage. His identity is shattered across both the personal and collective spheres, making him the tragic protagonist who turns into the oppressor.

4.5. Tragedy and Class Conflict in Reconciliation
Significantly, *Wuthering Heights* does not allow Heathcliff's legacy to flourish uncontrolled; rather, it dissipates. Reconciliation is sparked by Heathcliff's passing. The generational cycle of cruelty is broken when Hareton returns to school, Cathy Linton's spirit returns, and the estates are brought back to familial harmony. The cyclical nature of cruelty and vengeance is thereby disrupted, revealing how personal tragedy can influence broader social structures.

Brontë writes, "The whole scene seemed one of wild and radiant happiness" (Brontë, 2003),[32] highlighting the contrast between Heathcliff's tragic downfall and the restoration of social harmony. This conclusion implies that Heathcliff's function is paradoxically beneficial—his destruction makes room for healing. His tragedy and class uprising turn into the cathartic storm that makes room for love and harmony to blossom. Instead of ending in victory, his story ends with his lonely demise—a terrible conclusion and a devastating but essential blow to the moral framework of the novel.

4.6. A Hybrid Figure and Literary Significance
The narrative complexity of *Wuthering Heights* is reflected in this hybridity. By combining aspects of Gothic melodrama, social critique, and tragic intensity, the work defies Aristotelian unity. As the younger Catherine and Hareton progress toward reconciliation and togetherness, the novel's structure changes from tragic in the first generation to something like comedy in the second, disrupting narrative consistency. Because Heathcliff is both a destructive force and a facilitator of eventual repair, his fall is part of a greater dialectic that highlights his conflicted legacy.

Heathcliff is created by Brontë specifically to defy classification; he is both tragic and ideological, fervent and vicious, oppressor and oppressed. Understanding Heathcliff is enhanced by both lens: Marxism offers structural framework, while tragedy adds psychological depth. Together, they reveal Heathcliff as a symbol of how individual suffering, if left uncontrolled, can turn into collective violence and how ruthless revenge can taint even victory. This unresolvable ambiguity is what makes Heathcliff unique in literary history. Brontë purposefully kept Heathcliff morally suspended, neither redeemed nor justified, so that his unresolved shape would haunt readers.

This hybrid interpretation creates opportunities for more extensive contemplation. Heathcliff forces readers to think about how trauma and retaliation are cyclical, and how class relations intensify individual suffering. Identity and belonging—or the lack of it— fuel destructive tactics. Despite the invitation to understanding, the novel's failure to clear Heathcliff forces readers to consider moral complexity rather than absolute

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conclusions. A defining characteristic of literary force that endures over ages is our ability to sympathize and withdrawal.

Heathcliff is not merely a tragic protagonist nor a Marxist villain. He is a tragic class insurgent—a hybrid whose personal suffering sparks social violence and whose revenge results in material power but moral desolation. He is left unredeemed, tormented, and destabilizing by Brontë, guaranteeing that *Wuthering Heights* will always be a timeless examination of the effects of romance and class conflict combined. This study reveals Heathcliff's complex identity by fusing tragic theory and Marxist critique—not to reconcile him, but to recognize his tragic, unsettling, and resistant distinctiveness in the literary canon. His haunting potency is found in that enduring ambivalence.

5. Conclusion

Brontë's conscious refusal to categorize Heathcliff into a particular moral, social, or literary group is what gives him his enduring complexity in *Wuthering Heights*. As a tragic protagonist, Heathcliff transports the reader into an unbridled realm of empathy and disgust by embodying the fatal flaws and emotional intensity typical of both Aristotelian tragedy and the Byronic hero. His unwavering quest for vengeance and his intense devotion to Catherine expose a dangerous passion that consumes both him and those around him.

However, when analyzed from a Marxist perspective, Heathcliff's transformation from a destitute orphan to the ruler of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange illustrates the dynamics of class conflict and the disintegration of rural nobility in England. Marxist criticisms of the cyclical reproduction of power are highlighted by the fact that his achievement does not end the exploitive class system but rather reinforces its inequalities in a new way.

Heathcliff is protected from reductive moral categorization by this duality—tragic heroism intertwined with class hostility. He is both an active perpetrator of cruelty and a victim of systemic injustice; he is both a cunning capitalist exploiter and a romanticized symbol of outsider defiance. Readers are encouraged to consider the uneasy cohabitation of desire and exploitation, fragility and brutality, within a single character by Brontë's complex depiction. Heathcliff's legacy ultimately resides in his ability to unsettle us by questioning ideas of moral clarity and forcing us to face the intertwining of personal tragedy with the socioeconomic factors that influence our fates.

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