

## Female Consciousness in *Wuthering Heights*

ZHAO Juan<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Institute of Foreign languages, Beijing Technology and Business University, China

\*Corresponding author.

Email: zhaoj@th.btbu.edu.cn

Received 16 May 2011; accepted 18 August 2011

### Abstract

*Wuthering heights*, a representative work in Victorian Era by Emily Bronte, a famous female writer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Britain, has greatly influenced readers for generations. This article investigates the female consciousness in *Wuthering Heights* and analyses how Catherine rebels against the male-dominated society and pursues her love. The female consciousness includes the sense of independence and the pursuit of her true self. The spiritual equality is the foundation of happiness between lovers, and although women face lots of obstacles in their struggle and fight against the society, a wonderful future to women is to be ushered in if they keep fighting.

**Key words:** Feminism; Female consciousness; Rebellion; Spiritual pursuit

ZHAO Juan (2011). Female Consciousness in *Wuthering Heights*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 3(2), 25-27. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320110302.215>  
DOI: 10.3968/j.sll.1923156320110302.215

### INTRODUCTION

When mentioning the literature in 19<sup>th</sup> century, nobody can avoid *Wuthering Heights*, which laid the foundation of Emily Bronte's significant role in literature in the world. *Wuthering Heights* has been well known for its strangeness both in characters and in incidents. When first issued in 1847, it was not warmly accepted, instead, it was heavily attacked. It took decades for the novel

and its author to win world recognition. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, *Wuthering Heights* was regarded as a masterpiece, and Emily Bronte as one of the greatest authors.

The reason why I expound this literary work from the perspective of female consciousness is about the special social background of this book and the influence to the world's literature and the development of feminism. In 19<sup>th</sup> century, the position of women was inferior to men and they were regarded as the secondary sex. In Britain, people were usually rather conservative and women had little opportunity to be in touch with the society. Few women could create literature, which weren't accepted by the whole society.

Women's social status changed tremendously during the Victorian era at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. We can learn this from the literature of that time, not only in the work of the Bronte. Just ten years after Queen Victoria's accession to the throne in 1837, Charlotte completed her masterpiece *Jane Eyre*. The following year, Emily completed *Wuthering Heights*. It is their works that help us to have a better understanding of the Victorian era. Critics also call this period the era of female novelists.

In Victorian time, almost all novelists showed their concern about feminism in their works, and Emily was no exception. In her novel, she did not directly call for free live and equal marriage like the contemporary female novelists. Emily showed her consent on feminist attitude through actions of the protagonists and the development of the plot. As a novelist in early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Emily expressed her vague feministic thoughts via her only novel.

### 1. EMILY BRONTE AND WUTHERING HEIGHTS

Emily Bronte was born in Thornton, near Bradford in

Yorkshire. She was the younger sister of Charlotte Bronte and the fifth of six children. In 1824, the family moved to Haworth, where Emily's father was a curate, and it was in these surroundings that their literary oddities flourished. In childhood, after the death of their mother, the three sisters and their brother Patrick Branwell Bronte created imaginary lands, which were featured in stories they wrote. Little of Emily's work from this period survived, except for poems spoken by characters.

When Emily was a girl, she was lonely and proud. She didn't like to play with others and she would like to keep all the things in her own mind. She had an indifferent attitude to the outside world. She thought that her soul should have peace only after death.

It was the discovery of Emily's poetic talent by Charlotte that led her and her sisters to publish a joint collection of their poetry in 1846, *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Action Bell*. To evade contemporary prejudice against female writers, the Bronte sisters adopted androgynous first names. All three retained the same initials: Charlotte became Currer Bell, Anne became Action Bell and Emily became Ellis Bell.

In 1847, she published her only novel, *Wuthering Heights*, as two volumes of a three volume act. Its innovative structure somewhat puzzled critics. Although it received mixed reviews when it first came out, the book subsequently became an English classic. In 1850, Charlotte edited and published *Wuthering Heights* as a stand-alone novel and under Emily's real name.

## 2. FEMALE CONSCIOUSNESS IN WUTHERING HEIGHTS

### 2.1 Characteristics of Feminism in *Wuthering Heights*

Whether married or single Victorian women were expected to be weak and helpless, a fragile delicate flower incapable of making decisions beyond selecting the menu and ensuring her many children were taught moral values. A gentle woman ensured that the home was a place of comfort for her husband and family from the stresses of Industrial Britain. A woman's prime use was to bear a large family and maintain a smooth family atmosphere where a man need not bother himself about domestic matters

Is women's image only thin and weak? No, Emily has given us another answer in this novel. All of us are attracted by Catherine, the wild, hatless, arrogant savage instead of a gentle, graceful, and kind lady like Isabella who is dainty and elegant.

### 2.2 Catherine's Rebellion to her Father and Her Brother

Catherine's fairly hard rebellion against her father can find its best expression in three aspects: the offense against

her father, the negligence of her father's power, and the replacement of him by others. When her father lives, she loses favor with him. Here's an example:

"His peevish reproofs wakened in her a naughty to provoke him; she was never so happy as when we were all scolding her at once, and she defying us with her bold, saucy look, and her ready works; turning Joseph's religious curses into ridicule, baiting me, and doing just what her father hated most, showing how her pretended insolence, which he thought real, had more power over Heathcliff than his kindness. How the boy would do her bidding in anything, and his only when it suited his own inclination.

After behaving as badly as possible all day, she sometimes came fondling to make it up at night. "Nay, Cathy," the old man would say, "I cannot love thee; thou'rt worse than thy brother. Go, say thy prayers, child, and ask God's pardon. I doubt thy mother and I must rue that we ever reared thee!" That made her cry, at first; and then, being repulsed continually hardened her, and she laughed if I told her to say she was sorry for faults, and beg to be forgiven."

Obviously, the episodes demonstrate Catherine's offense against her father, her disobedience and the old Earnshaw's resentment towards her. In her father's eyes, she is not as good a girl as others; what's worse, she refuses to obey her father's wishes and even retorts.

Catherine Earnshaw is 12 years old when her father died in 1777. After the death of her father, Hindley, Catherine's brother, inherited everything from old Mr. Earnshaw. Unlike her father, Hindley has no affection for Catherine and hate Heathcliff. Hindley degrades Heathcliff to a servant; he flies into a temper if Catherine shows any affection for Heathcliff. Without any doubt, Hindley turns the family into one imbued with indifference, liveliness, dread and disorder. For example:

"He drove him from their company to the servants, deprived him of the instructions of the curate, and insisted that he should labor out of doors instead, compelling him to do so, as hard as any other lad on the farm."

Thus, under such an adverse situation, both Catherine and Heathcliff show strong and implied yearns to be together, to be joined and unified. As Catherine says herself, her love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath a source of little visible delight, but necessary.

Without doubt, the love suffers her brother's strong opposition. Despite his objections, Catherine still refuses to give it up; what's more, she joins her hands with Heathcliff to rebel against Hindley, for the reason that the latter's practice deprives her of the exclusive privilege to enjoy the freedom to be herself. It is her bottom love that enable her to realize her self-identity.

### 2.2 Catherine's Rebellion to Her Husband

Before marrying Linton, Catherine says to Nelly that she loves Edgar Linton, because he is civilized and well-mannered. And afterwards, she acts as a docile wife until the reappearance of Heathcliff. Then it could be proved that only when Catherine feels robbed of the rights to enjoy her natural love does she begin to rebel against her

husband.

From Catherine's point of view, the Lintons are never unlike the Earnshaws, for she is constantly under the tense control of the head of families. Thus, a traditional woman cannot refuse to accept the destiny of being controlled. Catherine is not an exception. Locked in Thrushcross Grange, Catherine expresses a deep depression and a discomfort of being deprived of freedom and privileges. Catherine, thus, goes a different way. Strictly confined by the family and somewhat deprived of the freedom to love, Catherine tries her best to resist the authority of a patriarchal institution and to surpass it to realize her own individual validation. Here, a woman does not mean to draw her husband to an internalized kingdom, but show her distinctness. And, a woman is confronted with him: each side refuses to yield to the other, and intends to control the other.

Catherine's eternal love for Heathcliff is the strongest opposition against her husband. Catherine's love for the former by a long way surpasses that for Linton. In her eyes, everything related to Linton is superficial, unimportant to her; and her real, underlying life is permanently stuck to Heathcliff's.

She resists against her father, her brother and her husband. She feels indignant with them, not that she does so irrationally, but that dominance over her infringes on her right to enjoy freedom and diminish her individuality. Thus her denial of the patriarchy stems from her strong sense of protecting her self-awareness.

---

## CONCLUSION

*Wuthering Heights* is unlike any other novel in the genre of Victorian literature in that it stands outside the social traditions of its time. Victorian literature characteristically regards the individual as a member of society. In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë describes the society from a completely individual point of view for the first time. While many of the great Victorians of the early to middle period, they deal more explicitly with moral and social concern than she does. Emily expresses more of the primitive and spiritual side of the human spirit in the novel, which is excessively concealed in this period of time.

Catherine's persistent, daring struggle for the true love is a symbol of the awakening of women consciousness in love and in marriage. Though she marries Edgar to get a

better life, her love is left on Heathcliff. She dares to rebel against the tyranny as she clearly knows who her real love is. Catherine speaks out Victorian women's ambivalence --- she longs for freedom and her true self. Whenever she wants to escape the shackles, those who put them on her will hold them tight and punish her painfully enough to make her surrender.

Equality is a very important foundation for happiness in love and marriage. The equality between men and women is the sublimation of personal independence and freedom. In Catherine's opinion, equality between men and women does not only refer to equal position and equal rights in the society, it also means the spiritual equality and soul similarity in heaven. Thus, keeping self-integrity is of utmost importance to Catherine. This is really a bold voice in 19<sup>th</sup> century England. As some feminists have pointed out, Catherine is like the turning-point of the era. She endures the change of the ideas, that's why she endures a lot of tortures in the novel.

The prospect of women's consciousness for the ideal love and marriage is not gloomy, however it is certain to be tortuous and even sometimes it will suffer the tragic failure. Though sometime women's struggle will encounter some unexpected setbacks and even tragic failure, however, women have never stopped their exploring steps. After experiencing so many hardships, they grow more and more mature and experienced, which enables them to prepare for the future struggle beset with more difficulties on their love journeys.

---

## REFERENCES

- Elain Showalter (2004). *A literature of Their Own British Women Novelists from Brontë to Bessing*. Foreign Language and Research Princeton University Press.
- Myra Marx Ferree, Patricia Yancey Martin (1995). *Feminist Organizations Harvest of the New Women's New Movement*. Temple University Press.
- CHEN Zhenjiao (2005). *The Fourth Image of Woman---A Recalcitrant While Docile Women: Catherine Earnshaw in Wuthering Heights*. Suzhou University.
- XU Yuqin (2008). *Feministic Voices in Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights*. Shanghai Foreign Language University.
- LU Changlan (2005). *Women Looking for Hearth and Home--An Analysis on the Hearth and Home Complex in English Women Novels in the 19th Century*. Hebei University.