

Candidate 4

<p>Title of Dissertation</p> <p>An exploration of the extent to which Heathcliff and Mr Rochester conform to the Gothic convention of the Byronic hero in Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte and Wuthering Heights by Emily Bronte</p>	<p>Word count (Max 3000)</p> <p>2,999</p>
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12/1

*Lone, wild, and strange, he stood alike exempt
From all affection and from all contempt.*

—Byron

An exploration of the extent to which Heathcliff and Mr Rochester conform to the Gothic convention of the Byronic hero in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë.

12/2

The so-called 'Byronic hero' is a character type first developed in Lord Byron's poem "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" and is commonly a genre marker in Victorian Gothic novels. The character, usually male, exemplifies an anti-hero, possessing both admirable and unappealing traits. One of the generally accepted definitions is: "the Byronic hero presents an idealized, but flawed character whose external attributes include: rebellion, great passion, great talent, lacking of respect for rank and privilege, an unsavoury secret past, arrogance, overconfidence or lack of foresight and ultimately a self-destructive manner"¹. A vast array of characteristics and traits apply to the Byronic hero, including "remarkable intelligence and cunning, strong feelings of affection and hatred, impulsiveness, strong sensual desires, moodiness, cynicism, dark humour, and morbid sensibilities"². In both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* Edward Rochester and Heathcliff are examples of a Byronic hero. These characters adopt some traits of the Byronic hero to different extents and in different ways, although both are equally intriguing.

One of the main defining traits of a Byronic hero is his dark or mysterious, often unsavoury, background. This is especially true of Heathcliff, who was found homeless and starving on the poverty stricken streets of Liverpool, and because of this he is always an outcast from Victorian society – he never makes any attempt to fit in. This has ramifications on his ability to be with who he wants to marry: Cathy wants someone of a higher class and Isabella already is, so he faces challenges in attaining them. There is much mistrust of Heathcliff, who is often described as a "gipsy" because it is likely that Heathcliff is of a mixed race; in Brontë's time the societal expectation of true gentleman was to be fair and white. Heathcliff is automatically shunned and abhorred by his social superiors – this suggests an undercurrent of racism and the Victorian fear and mistrust of foreigners. Furthermore, there is likening of Heathcliff to a changeling (an evil child swapped for a human baby):

"They had christened him 'Heathcliff'; it was the name of a son who died in childhood, and it has served him ever since, for Christian and surname."³

¹ Wei Zhao. (2015). Byronic Hero and the Comparison With Other Heroes. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 10(6), 29-32

² Study, *Byronic hero*. Available at: <http://study.com/academy/lesson/byronic-hero-definition-characteristics-examples.html> (Accessed: 10 February 2016)

³ Brontë, Emily (1847) *Wuthering Heights*. London: Penguin Books. p37-38

12 / 3

Changelings were often blamed for maladies or disability in children and were perceived as evil and cruel – Heathcliff is almost a replacement child for the one that died, becoming an intruder. His lack of surname also highlights how much of an outsider he is within the Earnshaw family. Brontë uses the characterisation of the outsider to show the reader why Heathcliff is treated abysmally throughout his life, and to engender a level of sympathy for him when he becomes cruel.

Conversely, Rochester makes an attempt to fit in to society by concealing his unsavoury past, and to the outsider, appears a fine gentleman. Forina states that “Brontë further depicts Rochester as a Byronic hero by portraying him as a man burdened with a great sin of his past for which he has not yet repented”⁴. This is portrayed in the novel as Rochester unknowingly marries a madwoman, telling himself:

“You may take the maniac with you to England; confine her with due attendance and precautions at Thornfield: then travel yourself to what clime you will, and form what new tie you like.”⁵

He will not repent for his sins as he does not associate with religion or the church at this point in the novel. This mysterious nature of his is also Byronic; he buries his secrets deep and hides his deranged wife from society. The fact that he confines a human being in his attic, trapped and never spoken about, suggests a darker, more sinister aspect to his nature.

The revelation of Bertha in the attic is one of the key moments within the novel and is a turning point for Jane; perhaps if he had been more honest she would not have left him, but Rochester’s Byronic nature suspends him from honesty. The minor character of Mason also helps to convey that Rochester has a past he does not want surfaced:

“You will not speak to him on any pretext – and – Richard, it will be at the peril of your life if you speak to her”⁶

⁴ Forina, Marybeth (2014). Edward Rochester: A New Byronic Hero. Undergraduate Review, 10, 85-88. Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol10/iss1/19

⁵ Brontë, Charlotte (1847) *Jane Eyre*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics. p272

⁶ Jane Eyre. p184

17/4

Rochester warns Mason that if he so much as speaks, he will kill him, simultaneously displaying his darker side and his willingness to keep things from Jane. Although he may describe Jane as his equal, Rochester does not treat her so, as he often lies to her and keeps her in the dark. He constantly attempts to maintain a position of control – he chooses what to hide from Jane and he forces Mason into silence.

Another trait that Rochester possesses is that he is consumed by love and passion; “the Byronic philosophy sees love as the ultimate, and only, essential truth and final resting place for one in this life”⁷. It can be said that the “Byronic hero is human being and loves human beings”⁸ – unlike other subtypes of the hero, a Byronic version is not a perfect creation and contains flaws, making him more realistic. Rochester shows this desire for love by defying the Victorian convention of marrying someone who is of an equal class as themselves when he proposes to Jane:

“My bride is here,’ he said, again drawing me to him. ‘because my equal is here, and my likeness, Jane, will you marry me?’”⁹

Another typical aspect of the Byronic hero is he believes himself above spiritual or societal law, and this is definitely portrayed here: Rochester goes against societal “law”, or expectation, by asking someone of a lower class to marry him and describing them as equals, and also against the spiritual law of the Church by attempting to commit bigamy. He is so certain of his love for Jane that he is blinded, becoming adamant that they shall be together, with disregard to the consequences. This can be interpreted as an attraction for Jane as “to make the impossible possible is the erotic excitement of the dangerous lover romance”¹⁰ but in this case the fact that he has concealed his first wife overrides her passion. He is not truthful with her, and by betraying her trust he drives Jane to depart – ultimately, Rochester’s Byronic traits lead to his own self-destruction.

⁷ Lutz, Deborah (2006). The dangerous lover: Gothic Villians, Byronism and the nineteenth century seduction narrative. Available at: https://kb.osu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/1811/24173/Lutz_T-S_Final.pdf?sequence=1 (Accessed: 09 March 2016)

⁸ Wei Zhao. (2015). Byronic Hero and the Comparison With Other Heroes. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 10(6), 29-32.

⁹ Jane Eyre. p224

¹⁰ Lutz, D.

12/5

Despite their separation, Rochester and Jane's love is still felt so passionately and strongly that they establish a spiritual connection, deeper than any sort of physical love. In his time of greatest distress, Rochester calls for Jane, who hears him from miles away:

“It was the voice of a human being – a known, loved, well-remembered voice – that of Edward Fairfax Rochester; and it spoke in pain and woe, wildly, eerily, urgently.”¹¹

The feelings of love for one another are so strong that they are connected on every level – like a true Byronic hero, Rochester is driven by his love for another. The psychic, almost supernatural element to this is, however, less Byronic as he should not possess superhuman powers; he should exist entirely on earth. Rochester spends much of his time suppressing his emotions and concealing them from Jane at the beginning of their relationship; while Heathcliff, contrastingly, is a more open and expressive character.

Heathcliff is frequently described as cruel and incapable of compassion, yet the Byronic strength of his love for Catherine shows “he is rather capable of intense love and of making great sacrifice”¹². His pure devotion to her alone partially redeems his evil characterisation – it also furthers the romance and the strength of feeling he has for her, as she reveals a whole new side to his character. Both Catherine and Heathcliff are linked to the wildness of the moors, and both feel comforted by the sublime nature – this is what establishes the connection between them and this bond becomes unbroken, not even by death. This is symbolised when both characters are near their separate deaths, they open the window to be closer to nature, and therefore each other. Catherine claims:

“Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same”¹³

They are allegedly just separate versions of each other and their love runs on a spiritual level. Heathcliff has no love for anyone else, but Cathy loves Edgar also, on a materialistic level:

¹¹ Jane Eyre. p371

¹² Uddin, Nasir. (2014) Heathcliff, the Protagonist of Emily's Brontë's Wuthering Heights as a Byronic Hero. 259-264 Available at: <http://www.languageinindia.com/march2014/v14i3march2014.pdf> (Accessed: 03 March 2016)

¹³ Wuthering Heights. p81

12/6

“If he loved with all the powers of his puny being, he couldn’t love as much in eighty years, as I could in a day”¹⁴

Heathcliff’s bold claim proves the difference between himself and Edgar and the conflict that Cathy’s love for Edgar creates. Heathcliff’s arrogance is again Byronic; he believes himself to be above Edgar, despite not being the person that Catherine actually chose. He is partially justified, as there are many scenes in the novel where his desire is apparent: for example, he persuades the sexton to dig up her grave to have one last glimpse of her, he calls for the spirit of Catherine to return to haunt him and he is distraught when she claims it would degrade her to marry him. These events all suggest that Heathcliff is being legitimate in his claims of deep passion. He is not a conventionally attractive character and his Byronic traits had the potential to drive Cathy – and especially Isabella – away from him, but instead have the opposite effect and draw the women towards him which suggests the true appeal of this sub-type of the hero. Lutz states that the reason Byronic heroes so often appear in romance novels is: “the dangerous lover narrative has become the conventional way to represent erotic desire and romantic love”¹⁵.

Intelligence, or the idea of being learned, is a further key aspect of the Byronic hero, allowing him to be cynical and additionally attractive to women. Heathcliff, however, is denied his formal education by Hindley who is jealous, but whilst Heathcliff is not learned he certainly retains his intelligence. Heathcliff is completely overcome when Cathy does not choose him, and all of his admirable qualities are lost, replaced with passionate revenge. He warps his intelligence towards vengeance and becomes consumed by strong feelings of anger (as the Byronic hero can be consumed by love, he is also susceptible to hatred). Heathcliff decides at a young age that he hates Hindley, and even after departing for several years, on return he confesses:

“I meditated this plan – just to have one glimpse of your face – a stare of surprise, perhaps; afterwards settle my score with Hindley”¹⁶

¹⁴ Wuthering Heights. p148

¹⁵ Lutz, Deborah (2006). The dangerous lover: Gothic Villians, Byronism and the nineteenth century seduction narrative. Available at: https://kb.osu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/1811/24173/Lutz_T-S_Final.pdf?sequence=1 (Accessed: 09 March 2016)

¹⁶ Wuthering Heights. p97

12/7

His hatred for Hindley never fades, and Heathcliff imparts it on Hindley's son, denying him of the social class position he should have access to, in a similar situation to how young Heathcliff was treated. Heathcliff's return shows his unchanging characterisation; he is still filled with hatred for Hindley, and immense love for Cathy. He also wants revenge against Edgar, and he does this in multiple ways, firstly by marrying Isabella, despite the fact that "he makes it quite clear to Catherine and Nelly that he actually hates Isabella"¹⁷. He then slyly matches his own son with Edgar's daughter as an attempt to possess Linton's property – he predicts that they will be attracted to one another. Revenge is a prevalent theme in the novel because of Heathcliff.

In contrast to Heathcliff, Rochester barely shows any tendency towards revenge but displays his intelligence by being cunning and deceiving, putting on false personas and telling lies. Upon Jane and Rochester's first meeting, she is asked "Whose house is it?" by Rochester and she naively replies "Mr Rochester's"¹⁸. He is aware that Jane does not know who he is, so he plays with her; this sets the tone for the rest of their relationship, as he often deceives her and conceals the truth.

A further example of his deceit is when he gets her to believe he is "as good as a married man"¹⁹ to Blanche, a woman of similar class to him, purely to make Jane jealous – Jane is cleverer than he anticipates though, and she recognises that he does not love Blanche. She does, however, believe they are to be married. Rochester constantly assesses Jane's behaviour towards any news of their union before telling her:

"What love have I for Miss Ingram? None: and that you know. What love has she for me? None: as I have taken pains to prove: I caused a rumour to reach her that my fortune was not a third of what was supposed"²⁰

He has been cunning in two parts, tricking Blanche into believing he was not wealthy so she would not be attracted to him and Jane into thinking that he intended to marry not for love, but for material gain. He analyses the motivation of others and is obviously exceptionally

¹⁷ Uddin, N.

¹⁸ Jane Eyre. p99

¹⁹ Jane Eyre. p223

²⁰ Jane Eyre. p224

12/8

perceptive. It is clear here that he still does not truly view Jane as his equal and treats her as such.

Emotional torture is a prevalent feature amongst Byronic heroes; there is a large turning point in Rochester's characterisation when his house is burned to the ground and he loses an arm and his sight. His character is utterly destroyed and he becomes lost in the world, unable to fend for himself: "now Rochester is in a position of weakness and therefore, his arrogance has disappeared"²¹. When Jane returns to find him, needy and desperate, his Byronic features have begun to decay and he confesses:

"I thought you would be revolted, Jane, when you saw my arm, and my cicatrised visage."²²

This moment of weakness shows that he has lost his initial cockiness and is readily available to admit flaws and has actually become self-conscious; a large contrast to his previous characterisation. Interestingly, Brontë deviates from the standard form of the Byronic hero as "Rochester then evolves as a character and repents for his past sins, altering from the stereotypical traits of Byronic heroes"²³. It can be argued that this shift in character contributes to the compatibility of the pair and removes the barrier between them; Rochester has lost his sense of superiority and Jane truly becomes his equal. Therefore, the fire can be described as a *deus ex machina* in the novel. The subversion of Rochester's Byronic character is what ultimately leads to his fulfilment. Jane would not have been able to wed him before this transformation and so Brontë creates a moral novel – those who repent their sins and seek forgiveness, abandoning their negative traits in return for Christian ones, will prevail.

Heathcliff is a static character, and does not experience any transition, so it can be argued that Emily Brontë is implicitly stating a similar idea – Heathcliff never achieves fulfilment. Whilst, similarly, Heathcliff experiences his share of emotional torture and great pain, his character dies retaining all of his characteristics. Towards the end of his life, he becomes desperate for the presence of Cathy. When he finds out that Lockwood has witnessed the ghost of Cathy clawing at the window, he becomes hysterical and begs her to haunt him:

²¹ Forina, M.

²² Jane Eyre. p386

²³ Forina, M.

12/9

“‘Come in! Come in!’ he sobbed. ‘Cathy, do come. Oh do – once more!’”²⁴

Heathcliff's love has continued far beyond the grave and far beyond a simplistic physical attraction to a deep spiritual connection. His whole life has been tragic since she chose Edgar over him and now, in death, he requests to be lain beside her – this is his only period of happiness, which is ironically found in death. His desire to be haunted by her symbolises the reason for Heathcliff's self-inflicted emotional torture and perhaps if he had tried to reverse some of his Byronic traits in a similar fashion to Rochester, he could have eventually found solace.

It can be clearly be seen in both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* that Rochester and Heathcliff embody many characteristics of the Byronic hero that is so prevalent in Victorian Gothic novels of the era. Whilst they both displays these habits and traits, they do so in different ways that are often contrasting to one another; this could explain why the novels have such contrasting denouement. Rochester's less positive aspects are balanced by his charming traits, whereas Heathcliff's only redeeming quality is his ability to love, which he contorts into a reason for vengeance and suffering. Rochester is forced to abandon his Byronic traits, so therefore it can be argued that he is does not truly meet the character type, and yet whilst Heathcliff may retain his until the end, he is never described as doing anything truly heroic. Heathcliff is a complex character who is more unappealing than admirable, leaving the reader in turmoil over how they feel about him, so in that respect alone he is Byronic to a larger extent than Rochester – Rochester, however, is more heroic and likeable character, so fits the description of a hero more than Heathcliff. To conclude, both characters are Byronic in different ways, providing a twist on the ideals that Lord Byron so famously coined.

²⁴ *Wuthering Heights*. p28

12 / 10 .

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