

**RESEARCH ARTICLE*****“I Love My Murderer”—Masochism in *Wuthering Heights****

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**Abstract:**

Though the sadistic tendency in *Wuthering Heights* is widely discussed by critics, there exists little research about masochism, which as this thesis points out is an essential element of the novel. By analysing the language and behaviour of the two major characters, Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff, the thesis aims to explore the causes of their masochistic inclinations.

**Key words:** masochism, *Wuthering Heights*, psychoanalysis, Emily Brontë

Critics point out that *Wuthering Heights* is a book of violence. Wade Thompson calls the world of the novel “a world of sadism” (71), and explores the infanticide theme in relation to Emily Brontë’s poems. Marianne Thormahlen attempts to explain why readers empathize with the characters’ brutality. Stacy L. Rinder argues that the text intends to illustrate “a civilised person’s inherent violent nature” (23). Susan Mary Pyke’s and Lisa Surridge’s dissertations connect animals with the cruelty depicted in the book. In the existing literature, although much is said about sadism, which is evident throughout the book, little is said about its opposite: masochism. One exception is Claire Jarvis’s book, which uses Gilles Deleuze’s theory to argue that Brontë contrasts the “masochistic dyad” of Heathcliff and Catherine with the “sadistic model of legal marriage” (25) in a patriarchal society. While Jarvis analyses the relationships in the novel in terms of dominance versus submission, sadism and masochism are not always, or necessarily, opposite pairs. This essay explores the masochistic tendency in the subconscious of both Heathcliff and Catherine (In this essay, Catherine refers to Catherine Earnshaw Linton.), attributing it more to their childhood experience than to their social conditions.

Although Heathcliff appears mostly as an abuser, especially during his revenge in the second half of the book, and obviously enjoys maltreating those around him (“The more the worms writhe, the more I yearn to crush out their entrails!” Brontë, 144), this essay argues that he has an inner desire for torment. It draws on Freud’s assertion that the “active and passive forms” of sadomasochism “are regularly found occurring together in one and the same person” (20). That is, people who appear to be sadistic tend also to have masochistic inclinations. This is because masochism is another form of sadism, in which the self, instead of the other, is the target. Heathcliff’s masochistic nature is manifested predominantly through his relationship with Catherine.

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After Catherine's marriage, Heathcliff says to her, "You are welcome to torture me to death for your amusement" (Brontë, 106). His willingness to be hurt by Catherine can be ascribed to loneliness. As Yinhe Li, one of China's most prominent sociologists, points out, "Sadomasochism shows a yearning for relationships... Subjecting oneself to other people is the most reliable way to avoid solitude and to build relations. When you are being hurt and tormented, certainly you are not alone" (196, my translation). Heathcliff is "a sullen, patient child" willing to "stand Hindley's blows without winking or shedding a tear" (Brontë, 34). Even his patience, however, fails to win care and love from people around him. Hindley beats him, Mrs Earnshaw "never [puts] a word on his behalf when she [sees] him wronged", and Ellen Dean admits she "still [can't] dote on Heathcliff" (Brontë, 35), even though he makes less trouble than the other children ill. After the death of Mr Earnshaw, Catherine is the only one who is friendly to Heathcliff. To retain this friendship, Heathcliff succumbs to her, intentionally or unintentionally. Before she passes away, he cries out, "I forgive what you have done to me. I love *my* murderer" (Brontë, 152).

Heathcliff's masochistic nature is displayed most evidently after he hears of Catherine's death. He "[dashes] his head against the knotted trunk" until "his hand and forehead [are] both stained" with blood. This physical self-abuse is meant to release his pain within. Next, he calls on the ghost of Catherine to "haunt" him, and says that he would rather she "drive [him] mad" than "leave [him] alone in this abyss, where [he] cannot find [her]". Here, Heathcliff tries to feel alive by causing himself pain. He claims that Catherine is "[his] life" (Brontë, 158), and asks how can he live with half of his soul missing. His choice is to fill the void with pain; it is better to feel tormented than to feel empty.

Despite Jarvis's claim that Catherine is dominant and Heathcliff is submissive in their non-marital relationship (41-42), this contrast is far from fixed, as they both show masochistic inclinations. During their last meeting, their physical expression of affection is rather violent. Catherine "[makes] a spring" to Heathcliff, and they are "locked in an embrace from which [Nelly thinks her] mistress would never be released alive" (Brontë, 152). Besides implicit physical violence, there is language abuse. "You have killed me—and thriven on it, I think," says Catherine to Heathcliff, who in turn accuses her of being selfish and "possessed with a devil" (Brontë, 150). Although these words may sound full of hatred, however, the couple do not break from each other's embrace, but cry with "their faces hid against each other". Upon Edgar's arrival, Heathcliff "[strains] Catherine closer", and the latter "never [moves]" (Brontë, 153). It is safe to say that they seem eager to maintain this relationship of mutual torture.

Although there is no actual physical torment between the two, they abuse each other mentally by marrying someone else. Desperately hurt as they both feel (Catherine quarrels with Isabella, and Heathcliff seeks revenge on Edgar), they refuse to break the tie. Instead, their relationship is strengthened as they torture each other more (Rinder, 28). The last time they meet is the first time that they hold and kiss each other. It is interesting that such intimacy is aroused after they have been severely hurt by each other.

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Their attachment to the painful relationship, this essay argues, has a lot to do with their childhood experience. As analysed above, the young Heathcliff is frequently maltreated by his peers. Comparably, as a mischievous little girl, Catherine is told by her father, “I cannot love thee; thou’rt worse than thy brother” (Brontë, 38-39). The people around them use abusive language and behave violently towards them rather than showing them tenderness and care. Such a childhood environment has great influence on their understanding of close relationships. Thompson argues that Catherine’s “‘love’ is expressed through pain, hate and relentless recrimination” (73). Given the similarities in their behaviour and upbringing, this appears also to be true of Heathcliff’s “love”, the sadistic nature of which Catherine seems to have realized. She says to Nelly, “...he [Heathcliff] would not relent a moment to keep me out of the grave. *That* is how I’m loved!” (Brontë, 151). In their shared mindset, hate equals love – a code comprehensible to both. By bearing the other’s torment and listening to their mutual accusations, they subconsciously experience the excitement of love.

In addition, Heathcliff shows a masochistic tendency in his relationship with Isabella due to the impact of his childhood environment. Indeed, readers usually focus on his ill treatment of her rather than the other way around, but some must wonder why Heathcliff tries so hard to make Isabella hate him (Brontë, 142). Besides his desire to cause her despair, his experience of maltreatment as a child may have made him used to an environment full of malice. Being loved tenderly may make him feel uncomfortable, because people feel safe with what is familiar. Heathcliff thus needs to be hurt to keep his mind at peace.

The pursuit of death is the most extreme form of masochism. Both Catherine and Heathcliff express the desire to die, and finally put it into practice. During their last meeting, the former says, “I wish I could hold you till we were both dead!” (Brontë, 150). She is “wearying to escape into that glorious world”, and thinks she “shall be incomparably beyond and above” (Brontë, 151) others when she arrives there. Here, according to this essay’s interpretation, “that glorious world” refers to her childhood world in Wuthering Heights and on the moors nearby, which cannot possibly be regained while she is alive. Her suppressed longing breaks out in the form of self-destructive hysteria. For instance, she asserts that she “will try to break [Heathcliff’s and Edgar’s] hearts by breaking [her] own” (Brontë, 110), and after the quarrel between these two men, she shuts herself in a dark room for three days. She decays day by day, and is finally consumed because of her self-maltreatment.

Catherine’s chronic suicide can be attributed to the chains of marriage. Although she is independent and free during her early childhood, she is turned into a “lady” by Frances Earnshaw, who instils in her “a desire for a wifely status rather than a companionate marriage” (Jarvis, 39). In their traditional marital relationship, with the female inferior to the male, Catherine depends on Edgar psychologically (Tytler, 318). He offers a comfortable environment and tender care, which she does not admit to needing. She enjoys the comfort of a cosy, loving home at the cost of her freedom to pursue a deeper spiritual need, i.e. the desire for the sense of familiarity with her childhood, which is characterized by roughness and liberty. This desire is awakened after Heathcliff’s return, and it

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explains why she “[requires] to be let alone” (Brontë, 111) when Edgar asks her to choose between him and Heathcliff. She is in a dilemma of choosing between different mental needs. Besides, as a woman, although Catherine is indulged by her husband, she does not really have control over her own life. She has no right to reject her husband’s demands, such as banning Heathcliff’s visits. Thus, her aggression turns from outward (others) to inward (herself) because she cannot do harm to the protected side of the marriage; that is the reason why she deliberately damages her own health.

It is also clear that Heathcliff gladly allows himself to die at the end of the novel. He demands to be left in solitude and refuses to eat and sleep. He says to Nelly, “I have a single wish, and my whole being and faculties are yearning to attain it... I am swallowed up in the anticipation of its fulfilment” (Brontë, 305). This essay interprets his “single wish” as the desire to be reunited with Catherine; the only way to accomplish this goal is to kill himself. He seems to enjoy rather than endure this process: Ellen finds that there is “a strange, joyful glitter in his eyes” (Brontë, 307), and on his face appears “a kind of smile”. She comments on his altered expression as “unnatural” (Brontë, 308), not only due to his intention to die, but presumably also because he has seldom looked this happy in his life, especially since Catherine’s death. But then he says, “I’m too happy... My soul’s bliss kills my body” (Brontë, 313). The happiness of dying for Catherine is quite different from the pleasure he obtains by physically hurting his enemies: while the latter serves mainly as a vent for his repressed feelings for Catherine, the former satisfies his deepest desire to subject himself to Catherine entirely. The idea of being dead and decomposing with her underground profoundly satisfies Heathcliff’s masochistic needs, allowing him to totally renounce himself and merge with the one he loves.

In conclusion, it is due to their callous upbringings that Catherine and Heathcliff develop into masochistic characters. To avoid loneliness and emptiness, Heathcliff succumbs to Catherine mentally. They accept each other’s violent language and behaviour, which they interpret as love. Eventually, they kill themselves in the ultimate pursuit of masochistic desire.

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