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Wuthering Heights and the Colonial Uncanny

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'familiar, yet strange' (Butler 36)

Part of what makes the uncanny so compelling is that it is very difficult to define. Freud argues that the uncanny is ‘all that arouses dread and creeping horror’ (1) whilst also being ‘in reality nothing new[...]but something familiar and old’ (13). Applying Freud’s uncanny - the familiar becoming unfamiliar - as a theoretical framework to analyse Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* reveals the presence of a haunting, colonial uncanny in the text. In this essay, I will explore how perceiving Heathcliff as a manifestation of the uncanny is crucial in understanding the construction of his character. First, I will discuss how Heathcliff’s racial ambiguity combined with the wealth and power he acquires throughout the novel casts him as an uncanny double of a landed gentleman, which the other characters perceive as dangerous and disruptive. Furthermore, I will explore how this uncanny sensation is prompted by a colonial fear that the boundaries between the coloniser and the colonised will become too blurred as a result of assimilation. I will assert that Heathcliff is a manifestation of this colonial anxiety; that it is both his familiarity as a part of the Earnshaw family and Catherine’s beloved friend and his unfamiliarity as a racial Other that makes him strange and distrusted. Then, I will examine how Heathcliff’s acquisition of property and power exacerbates the uncanniness of his character, focusing specifically on Thrushcross Grange. I will argue that although Heathcliff becomes its ‘master,’ he is haunted by the Lintons’ racist and exclusionary treatment of him, and therefore he becomes an uncanny amalgamation of the abused subject and the abusive master. Finally, I will discuss the family relationships at *Wuthering Heights* at the end of the novel to examine how Heathcliff’s destabilisation of familial structures creates an uncanny tone in the narrative; focusing on how the Heights feels familiar yet unfamiliar due to the characters that inhabit it, and their relationships with one another.

When Mr Earnshaw first brings Heathcliff to *Wuthering Heights*, he is called a ‘gipsy brat’ and Cathy and Hindley refuse to have ‘it’ in their rooms with them (Brontë 30).

The dehumanisation and exclusion that they subject Heathcliff to upon this initial meeting represents the racial Othering and demonisation that Heathcliff will be a victim of for the rest of his life. His uncertain origins and racial ambiguity clouds perceptions of him with fear and suspicion. Mr Lockwood best demonstrates this when he describes Heathcliff as a 'singular contrast...a dark-skinned gypsy in aspect, in dress and manners a gentleman' (3). This assessment of Heathcliff characterises him as the uncanny double of the typical English gentleman. By the end of the novel he has the wealth and power of the English genteel but his racial otherness means the other characters perceive this accumulation of wealth as a strange and disrupted version of social hierarchy, with Heathcliff cast as the malevolent gothic double. This disrupted social order is unsettling, and this is an interesting form of discomfort when considered through a colonial framework. In her article 'Uncanny communities: Empire and its others' Kathy Butler describes how colonial assimilation destabilises the 'cultural limits and boundaries between citizen and Other,' (40) and the only way of counteracting this is through maintaining the 'colonial fantasy' of the 'savage' (43) who contradicts the civilised West. This is the framework through which Heathcliff is ostracised; there is a colonial fear that his presence will disrupt established social hierarchies. He is described explicitly as a 'savage beast' (146) but there is colonial Othering in much of the language used towards him. When Cathy and Heathcliff are found spying on the Lintons, Mrs Linton is horrified that Cathy is 'scouring the country with a gipsy...a strange acquisition...a little Lascar' (42-43). The racist description of Heathcliff as a 'gipsy' and a 'lascar' demonstrates the abuse and maltreatment Heathcliff experiences, but it also reveals that the Lintons' racism is exacerbated by their fear towards Heathcliff's racial ambiguity. The description of him as an 'acquisition' greatly dehumanises him, labelling him as a colonial good to be traded and bought; this is furthered by the fact that Heathcliff was found in Liverpool, a major port in the triangular slave trade (Khair, 159). In

this scene, there is an anxiety that Cathy is being corrupted by Heathcliff's influence, characterising him as dangerous and uncivilised; there is a fear that Cathy and Heathcliff's close relationship reflects an uncomfortable blurring of the boundary between the coloniser and the Other. Butler argues that this blurring creates an uncanny figure - when someone labelled as a savage assimilates to 'imperial values and customs' they become 'familiar, yet strange' (36). The imperial dichotomy of forcing a language and culture onto a colonised people and then labelling them 'savage' when they begin to assimilate to this imposed culture is paralleled in the tension between Catherine and Mr Earnshaw's desire to include Heathcliff in their lives and Hindley and the Lintons' determination to keep him an outsider. Much like a colonised people, Heathcliff had no autonomy in being brought to the Heights, and yet Hindley treats him like an intruder with malicious intent. He is trapped between Catherine's love and Hindley's hatred: embracing the home, language and family provided to him by Mr Earnshaw means he is villainised for corrupting Cathy and usurping established social hierarchies. The alternative, rejecting the customs of the coloniser and refusing to submit as the Other, give Hindley and the Lintons more ammunition to reject him from their social circles. It is through this dichotomy that Heathcliff becomes an uncanny figure; growing up alongside the Earnshaws and forming a deep connection with Catherine makes him deeply familiar, but he is too different and Other to be a trusted presence. This difference means he is perceived as dangerous in an indefinable way - a form of danger inexplicably linked to the uncanny.

Heathcliff becomes more uncanny as he accumulates land and power throughout the novel. When he is a young boy, despised by Hindley and forced to sleep in the stables, he is easily cast aside as an inferior Other that does not share the social circles of the other characters. Motivated by revenge, Heathcliff schemes to usurp established power structures by acquiring property and wealth. Through bribing Edgar Linton's lawyer, Heathcliff is

able to acquire Thrushcross Grange upon Edgar's death. Upon his first visit to the Grange as its owner, Nelly (both a long-term employee of the Earnshaws and the internal narrator of the story) describes that he 'made no ceremony of knocking...he was master, and availed himself of the master's privilege' (247). This entitled and dominating attitude must be placed in contrast with the scene I discussed earlier, when Heathcliff is deemed too uncivilised to be permitted entry to the Grange. The contrasting descriptors 'strange acquisition' and 'master' starkly reveal Heathcliff's rise to unprecedented power. Heathcliff has transformed from a product to be bought, to himself becoming the 'master' - a descriptor with connotations of slavery and colonial dominance. Nevertheless, Nelly goes on to say that despite Heathcliff's face being 'sallow and more composed' and 'his frame a stone or two heavier', there was 'no other difference' (247) between this 'master' and the man who visited Cathy at the Grange eighteen years ago. Viewing Heathcliff as a strange, uncanny merging of the abused subject and the abusive master helps us to better understand the contradiction he represents - no matter how drastically his circumstances change, he cannot escape the labels that have always been inflicted upon him.

The best representation of the way Heathcliff's accumulation of power creates an uncanny tone is found in the strange reversal of power dynamics at the end of the novel, with Heathcliff acting as a dictatorial figure over his 'subjects' Catherine Linton and Hareton. By destabilising the traditional family unit, he has forced the Heights to become an uncanny version of itself; Heathcliff's disruption of the family lineage and inheritance means the inhabitants of the Heights make up an atypical family dynamic. Some things remain the same - the house itself, Joseph's unpleasant ramblings, and Hareton and Catherine Linton are hauntingly uncanny in their resemblance to young Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw. Nevertheless, the tone of impropriety and disruption in this dynamic is inescapable. Heathcliff is abusive and tyrannical in his power, gleeful that he has robbed

Catherine Linton of money and happiness. Catherine and Hareton being deprived of both their sizable inheritances and the genteel lifestyles 'meant' for them as Earnshaws and Lintons is the ultimate disruption of the established social hierarchies. The combination of the familiar setting and characters of the Heights with the disruption and inversion in this dynamic create a deeply uncanny tone; a familiar scene plagued with unfamiliar structures. Heathcliff is responsible for this deconstruction of familial order and therefore he is characterised as a menacing and destructive force. Tabish Khair's article 'Let me in - Let me in' compares this presentation of Heathcliff to descriptions of modern terrorists, cleverly and patiently '[en]snaring the families that harboured him in a net of violence, revenge and terror' (157). Khair argues that Heathcliff terrorises the narrative and disturbs established power structures as a representation of how 'ghosts from the colonial margins' (157) haunt symbols of imperial power. This analysis highlights that although Heathcliff is cast as a sort of narrative terrorist, he too is haunted by the maltreatment he experienced, therefore making him an amalgamation of the power he has acquired and the inferiority he has always been viewed with.

Khair goes on to say that the only people who accept Heathcliff are those 'stand[ing] somewhere on the margins of power,' like Catherine Earnshaw and Hareton, who 'can begin to see the working of power as determinate, lopsided and oppressive' (160) and therefore can understand the systematic marginalisation that places Heathcliff as the inferior. This assertion is problematic as it casts aside Mr Earnshaw's acceptance of Heathcliff, which is instrumental to the narrative. Khair decides it is 'not feasible to discuss [Mr. Earnshaw's] reaction to Heathcliff' (159) because of his hasty death. Surely it is deeply significant that Heathcliff receives acceptance from the head of the Earnshaw family. Mr Earnshaw brought Heathcliff into his home, and was protective and loving towards him - in fact, it is this affection that causes such resentment for Heathcliff in Hindley. This is,

ultimately, the cause of the tension discussed earlier; the characters who despise and fear Heathcliff because of his Otherness can never truly cast him away because of the acceptance he receives from the widely adored Catherine and the patriarch Mr Earnshaw - therefore Heathcliff is able to haunt their lives as an uncanny merging of acceptance and exclusion.

In conclusion, Freud's uncanny provides a framework through which to understand and analyse Heathcliff's social exclusion and the development of his character. His uncanniness as both a familiar figure and an unfamiliar racial Other prompts colonial fear in many characters. Ultimately, their fear that he will blur the line between coloniser and Other and disrupt social order comes true, as Heathcliff takes from them the power they used to abuse him. Heathcliff is villainised from childhood; he is viewed as a malevolent force by those who are disturbed by his difference so it is devastatingly inevitable that Heathcliff becomes the villain he was labelled as. His tyrannical and cruel actions towards all those he held power against are motivated by a desire for vengeance that is understandable in the eyes of an empathetic reader. It is fascinating that Heathcliff is labelled as Other because he is perceived as undomesticated, dangerous and uncontrollable when in fact these are all features that are reflected in the wildness of the moors. Heathcliff is accused of deconstructing social order, but the fact his methods of chaos and gothic terror are more similar to the timeless landscape of the moors than Thrushcross Grange's manicured park, shows the fragility and fabrication of the very systems he is deconstructing. Perhaps what makes Heathcliff so uncanny is his similarity to the deeply familiar but wild and unknowable gothic landscape.

Works Cited

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