

## The Feminine in Wuthering Heights Adaptations

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### ABSTRACT

The intention of the paper is to demonstrate the way in which the feminine in Wuthering Heights films is rendered on screen, in consideration of the historical, cultural and socio-economical context of the adaptations, but also on whether the director of the film was a woman or a man. This particular issue is of interest to me, as the feminine in the Wuthering Heights screenings, I shall consider overtly, speaks for the role of the women and the way in which they were perceived by the societies of those times. In my endeavour, I shall focus on analysing various Wuthering Heights adaptations in terms of their fidelity or lack of it to the source text; moreover, it is my intention to also address this inquiry in terms of intertextuality and with reference to the layering process that undergoes an addition in meaning, through the adding and or altering of previous re workings. The partial conclusion so far is that Wuthering Heights film adaptations imply both recognition and remembrance of the novel, while also carrying an individual aura within them in terms of the way in which the original material is filtered and staged. I contemplate that my project contributes to the field of adaptive studies, while also addressing instances of cinematic depictions, especially as regards the way in which the feminine is delivered to the public.

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### Introduction

The intention of the thesis is not only to analyze Wuthering Heights more closely, both as an individual text and in the wider context of political, economic and historical factors, but also to discuss some of the most relevant screenings of the novel. Therefore, I shall examine the way in which an adapted work differs from the original, taking into account the familiarity and the new of adaptations, the differences perceived between literature and film, and likewise the contexts of the films considered, the process of re creation and reception presupposed by them, as well as the shifting intentions of an adapted piece of literature into another work.

### Adaptations of Wuthering Heights

#### William Wyler's 1939 film Adaptation of Wuthering Heights

The first adaptation brought up is the one from 1939, which gave the novel "cultural significance" and also set a "standard" to which many of the future films have been related. The film, directed by William Wyler, appeared after the First World War and before the Second, and this historical context is strongly imbedded in the images of the film. Although both the main actors and the screenwriter are British, scenes in the film are materialized in a British-American cultural dialogue transposed on screen by Catherine and Heathcliff, the main goal being to strengthen the alliance between the two nations at a delicate historic moment.

At the same time, the cultural context of the 1939 film is also worth mentioning: the swampy meetings between Catherine and Heathcliff represent not only transcendence itself, but also

the transcendence of British studies. Thus, the emergence, development, and establishment of British studies as the essence of the social formation occurred amid the repercussions of World War I as the trauma of war led to a "spiritual hunger", for which literature apparently had the answer. In other words, literary education has replaced lost social, religious, moral and intellectual traditions and values in a world in conflict.

However, the film was made in the Hollywood's "Golden Era", and this is reflected in the love story between Catherine and Heathcliff, transmitted to the public through beautiful, spectacular images and scenes. Perhaps the aspect that contrasts most with the novel is the image of Heathcliff: while Emily Brontë structured him as a hard and implacable character, the film presents him as a romantic hero, who tolerantly and silently endures the pain caused by other characters [1]. These mentioned elements, and not only, made their mark on the "personal note" that William Wyler gave to the 1939 film, granting the novel its action nuances in tune with the socio-economic, cultural, historical and political aspects.

There is a pertinent reason for which Wyler's adaptation was established as canonical, and that is because of the themes rendered so grandly on screen: the Sublime, the hilltop lovers, transcendent love. Thus, the shots of Catherine and Heathcliff while being on the moor are very still compared to the rest of the action, as if the lovers become one with the landscape and the sky, as if eternity sets up for those moments of transcendent unity and calmness. Nature is also an important element in the film, acquiring traits of the lovers and lending them characteristics of its own, leading thus to a communion between these forces. Moreover, the 1939 adaptation is also about the notions of identity and "home", rendering a representational power that "has in fact assured the afterlife of Wuthering Heights beyond the pages of the novel."

## Peter Kosminsky's 1992 Ambitious Narrative of Wuthering Heights

In this case, we are dealing with elements that keep the line of the novel, but also with new scenes added by the director, that are not found in Emily Brontë's work [1]. An undeniable similarity between the film and the novel is that of Catherine's character: the director built an image very close to the one described by the author we see, as previously read, an energetic Catherine, talkative and joking, who does not follow the rules. In opposition with Catherine's vividness and energy, Heathcliff, although equally rebellious, is portrayed as rough and grim. Kosminsky also attaches importance to the second generation, not just the first, as other films have done, and this aspect is also a new element brought in the film by the screening of the novel.

As mentioned above, the 1939 film became a reference point for the later ones: we find in Kosminsky not only fidelity to the original work, but also resemblances to the scenes of the two lovers. Similar to William Wyler, Peter Kosminsky shows Catherine and Heathcliff, in their meetings, with their eyes to the sky, in a transcendental union, motionless for a long time compared to the usual frames of the film. In addition, like the Golden age film, this is in fact the story of the main male character, Heathcliff, being presented as a hero with multiple facets and character traits. In Kosminsky's hands, Heathcliff preserves some aspects of the Romantic character in the novel, he is a suffering wronged hero, but also an attractive sadist.

Moreover, both 1939 and 1992 screen adaptations are men's narratives, as Heathcliff plays the leading role, with the implicit hypothesis that these films are the representations of "masculine narratives and masculine dramas of being, marketed as romantic stories for women under the trope of the lovers' discourse". Kosminsky's work of art is, likewise Wyler's, an embodiment of Heathcliff's spectacle of pain thus, the 1992 adaptation mirrors the fascination of the 1990s cinema with the masculine grief.

Not only does Peter Kosminsky pay tribute to William Wyler's 1939 screen adaptation of Wuthering Heights, but he also out-represents the latter by scenes and elements that define the film he directed: first of all, the 1992 moors consist of giant white rocks that contrast the darkness of the couple, as if Catherine and Heathcliff are the only inhabitants on earth. Second of all, although both screenings glamorize masculine pain and violence, on the one hand Wyler's Heathcliff directs it onto himself, while Kosminsky's Heathcliff inflicts cruelty upon women differently said, the 1992 Romantic hero is a product of the times when masculine misogyny was celebrated. Debating upon this issue within the wider context of the fall of post-industrialism, Ralph Fiennes exhibits the recognition of men as subjects-in-themselves, having their own needs and individuality.

Beyond the reference to Emily Brontë's work and Wyler's landmark screening, Kosminsky's ambitious screen "translation" of Wuthering Heights also brings new elements: first, the presence of the author herself in the film is an aspect that had not previously been introduced [2]. At the same time, the director places the male at the center of the narrative, which inevitably leads to the removal of the female to the edge. Along this line of ideas, with Heathcliff in absolute control of nature, the director added a scene not found in the novel or in any other adaptation: the male character is depicted as the master of nature and the one who decides Catherine's destiny when he prophesies about her life in accordance with the weather. With this in mind, I believe that the ambitious 1992 film is an esthetic transposition of undeniable

importance, which introduces elements of absolute novelty, giving the story a fresh air and a unique perspective.

## ITV's 2009 Two Part Series Adaptation of Wuthering Heights

Like the previous screenings discussed, the 2009 serial presents both known components, already consecrated at that time by the novel itself and the films launched before. Firstly, the ITV serial is quite faithful to Catherine's image as described by Emily Brontë, embodying a personality characterized by desire, aggression and excess found in the pages of the novel [2]. Secondly, the film that features Charlotte Riley and Tom Hardy tells, like previous major screenings, the story of Heathcliff: this time, the beginning scene has Heathcliff in the foreground, (a reminder of Ralph Fiennes' image) who is in Catherine's bed (instead of Lockwood, as we already know from the writer's story). At the same time, the beginning scene is resumed at the end (technique found in Kosminsky's film), a unique feature that gives Tom Hardy the role of the narrator.

On the other hand, the neo-Victorian adaptation of ITV incorporates characteristics of the Victorian era, brought to the fore precisely to be realized: "We no longer see in the past refuge from the present; instead, we excavate the past to expose its «iniquities and indignities»." A novelty of the 2009 film is that of building a metaphorical and ideological relationship between Catherine and Cathy an example of the daughter's materialization in her mother is the scene of Cathy's imprisonment in Catherine's room by Heathcliff. As he unearths Catherine's grave to embrace her remains in a spate of possessive desire, Cathy walks her hand over the inlays in her mother's furniture. The flashback technique that unites the two generations is present here: as Heathcliff returns from his "encounter" with Catherine, he looks up at her bedroom window to see Cathy through this image both mother and daughter personify the captive woman.

This two part serial was addressed to a young, educated target audience. ITV's film focuses on the historical context of the novel, and the themes covered are the role of women, feminism, notions of class and race, but also colonialism. A novelty is Catherine's numerous red garments, which are closely linked to the modernization and sexualization of the character in the film. However, Catherine's attachment to Heathcliff is far more complex and contradictory in the novel, unlike in this film, where her personality traits in relation to Heathcliff denote a simplification, translated into her desire for the man she loves. Another new aspect introduced by the ITV film is the placement of the well-known love story in a wider social and cultural context than the novel and previous adaptations, which had accustomed viewers to the pair of lovers isolated from the rest of the world.

The 2009 serial differs from the novel from a few points of view: first of all, the action is located in a late 19th century, as opposed to the novel, whose setting is the mid-Victorian society. In the second of all, unlike Cathy's interest for Linton found in the pages of the book, ITV presents a stronger daughter-mother bond; third of all, the film consists of sex scenes, which are not to be mentioned by Emily Brontë [1]. Fourth of all, Lockwood's character is removed from the screen adaptation and its function is taken by Heathcliff, which automatically leads to a shift of focus onto the second generation. As Heathcliff becomes the narrator, there is more emphasis on his inner life and the love he shares with Catherine.

Not only in regards to the novel is ITV's serial distinct, but also in relation to the previous adaptations: whereas the previous screenings discussed have placed the lovers in isolation, the 2009 serial present Catherine, Heathcliff and their love story in a wider social

context, as it is sprinkled with “a church congregation, a market day ... all crowded with people ...”. Also, the fore-mentioned strong ideological link between Cathy and her mother Catherine is something fully explored in this film. In addition, the sexualization of Catherine’s character is symbolized by the numerous red garments she wears in the film together with this aspect, the modernized Catherine’s contradictory desires are “domesticated” and disclosed through sexual desire .

### **The Trauma Dimension of Catherine and Heathcliff**

There is a powerful trauma dimension that stems, mainly, from the way the heroes are constructed both by the author and as rendered on screen, followingly. Consequently, investigating the way in which traumatic elements are transposed in the films discussed has been and still is one of the key aspects of my endeavor. Along this line of thought, I shall direct my attention on considering the traumatic representation of the main characters and, more specifically, the way in which the mother daughter relationship is displayed.

#### **Catherine**

Attentively constructing her character, Emily Brontë proves mastery with respect to a deep psychological insight: we are introduced to a surprisingly immoderate character that takes us by surprise every step of the way, in terms of immaturity, the refusal to grow up and assume responsibility, her inclination to a split identity, self destruction and a constant demonstration of extreme emotions and conduct [1].

All through her girlhood, Catherine starts leading a double life: she was one at home, a reckless girl inconsiderate of her manners, while a totally different one at the Lintons, where trying to charm everyone. Although Brontë’s main character sets out as a representative of innocence, authenticity, purity, the resident of the moors by Heathcliff’s side eventually succumbs to the social norms and chooses the material comfort at Thrushcross Grange and the advantages conferred by a marriage with Edgar this choice leads to Catherine’s further psyche split and her upcoming physical and mental downfall [1].

In the relationship with Heathcliff, Cathy lives in a heavenly setting; she is like a bridge to Heathcliff, leading us into his deepest inner being, as they defy both time and space. Her “fall from heaven” commences with her five-week stay at Thrushcross Grange for medical care after having been bitten by one of the Lintons’ dogs. Upon her return to Wuthering Heights, Catherine confesses to Nelly her oneness with Heathcliff, but chooses to give into Edgar’s marriage proposal.

Heathcliff’s leaving brings about Catherine’s delirious behavior, by means of hallucinations and catatonic symptoms. When Heathcliff returns Catherine’s twofold personality and her to and fro oscillation between conformity and nonconformity surface again: she is overjoyed at seeing his former lover, as inappropriate and preposterous as it may be for her condition of a married woman. It is on this particular occasion, again, an instance of Cathy evincing this “double character without exactly intending to deceive anyone” and without being entirely conscious of her thoughts, feelings and actions. This example adds up to the occurrences illustrating the main character’s identity diffusion and infantile regression, as well as her insecure attachment.

Catherine’s trauma, stemming also from childhood, is transposed into her self-destructive behavior: there are a few situations when she locks herself in her bedroom and refuses to eat, her target being that of indirectly punishing Heathcliff and Edgar through means

of direct self punishment. This instability is due to the fact that she realizes, after Heathcliff’s return and vengeful marriage to Isabella, that what she feared most has happened she has lost the paradisiac state of her youth. Alongside this idea, it is worth mentioning the instance when Catherine fails to recognize herself in the mirror: looking with her child’s eyes, she cannot make out who that grown-up woman in the mirror is.

The heroine of the novel fails once more to distinguish between past and present when being heavily pregnant and on her deathbed Catherine still doesn’t admit her actual condition and dreams about her childhood on the moors, a time when she hadn’t “betrayed her heart”. Not only the first Catherine is subject to a tragic life, but also her daughter: when a teenager, Catherine Linton seems to follow Cathy’s footsteps, as she seems not to live her own life, but to re-live that of her mother. Nonetheless, although they may have a rough start as a couple at Wuthering Heights, Catherine Linton and Hareton’s love leads them to a bright future.

On the one hand, Catherine has multiple facets and a troubled personality out of which she herself cannot make much of complementary to her attitude towards other people, her own self is distorted, as in her bedroom there are three different options of name scribbled Catherine Earnshaw, Catherine Heathcliff and Catherine Linton; what is more, there is an extensive inclination on her part to live in the past instead of the present on Heathcliff’s return, her repressed love for him emerges, but in her delirium she doesn’t refer to the grown up lover that has returned and is before her eyes, but to her companion with whom she wandered the moors in her youth.

On the other hand, although the second Catherine commences her adulthood similar to her mother’s and is prone to low points in life, she realizes only her action and determination will save her. Consequently, the heroine of the other part of the novel tames her intricate inner nature and decides to invest time and affection in her relationship with Hareton. By deciding to go on the road not taken by the previous generation, Cathy Linton and her husband rewrite the love story Catherine and Heathcliff shared, while at the same time shedding hope for the reader, as it is by their own will that they freed themselves from past constraints.

#### **Heathcliff**

Heathcliff is one of the main characters, alongside Catherine, being endowed with a complex, troubled personality. He is often times describes as primitive, brutal, his sole interest being Catherine, whilst his human state is frequently questioned . On the one hand, considering Wuthering Heights a Gothic novel has resulted in no interpretation of Heathcliff and his actions whatsoever in as much as, on the other hand, his unworldly love for Cathy and hate for the families residing at Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange respectively, taken to the extreme, have been thought of to pertain to a realm outside human nature.

Heathcliff’s fiendish behavior is attributed to the misery inflicted upon him when a child: as Mr. Earnshaw brought him home from Liverpool, he is rejected and abused by members of the household and develops, in time, strategies of defense. Although at first sight it may seem as if Heathcliff is rescued from a state of abandonment, with his arrival at the Earnshaws, he is psychologically abandoned. It is for this reason and for his unknown roots and primary childhood, that he develops and manifests throughout the novel, an acute sense of emotional instability, insecure attachment and a damaged personality.



Further on, Heathcliff exerts an out of the ordinary hardness and a lack of reliance on anyone else except Cathy, that gradually make him distance himself not only from the others, but also from his own feelings. Heathcliff becomes more estranged when he inadvertently hears the first part of Catherine's confession to Nelly, after having been proposed marriage by Edgar Linton. He then immediately flees and disappears for a few years to come back as a wealthy self made man. Upon his return, Heathcliff's way of acting is more compartmentalized than before, as he unleashes his accumulated hatred and frustration on anyone standing in his way.

Everything goes beyond the bearable with the onset of Catherine's illness and death, which trigger Heathcliff's insanity. It is on this occasion that Nelly describes him as a Gothic "savage beast goaded to death with knives and spears"; also, Heathcliff exerts a more and more traumatic attitude and conduct, as he refuses to live in the present where his beloved is not to be found anymore, but remains attached to his memories of the careless times when he was wandering the moors with Catherine. Another straightforward example of a pathological behavior from Heathcliff's part is the exhumation of Cathy's corpse, as a result of his intense desire of being with her in any form.

As Catherine dies, Heathcliff demands of her to haunt him, as if this was the only way for them to be together:

(1) "Be with me always take any form drive me mad! Only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! Oh, God! It is unutterable! I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!"

Heathcliff's decline begins shortly afterwards, as he adopts the same standpoint as Catherine: he neglects his health, he is no longer interested in life and wanders the moors on his own. On the contrary, as soon as he senses that his painful existence is about to end and he will reunite with his beloved in a short while, Heathcliff grows into a cheerful man. During one of the following mornings, Nelly frighteningly finds him dead in Cathy's paneled bedroom [3,4].

## Conclusion

I have already evaluated the general lines of the two films and the TV series, in terms of historical, cultural and social contexts, but also with reference to the portrayal of the main characters. It is my intention to further investigate the gender argument and detail it in my thesis, along with the way in which women and men are represented on screen, according to the period of the release of the film adaptations thus, from this viewpoint, I shall widen my area of research and include more screen adaptations than the ones debated here, also more recent ones. Besides the aspects mentioned, the thesis will additionally and conscientiously consider a parallel between the adaptations put forth, in terms of similarities and differences from one to the next, novelties added, but also the choice of including and centering on some elements from the novel while leaving aside others.

## Declaration of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interests.

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