




# Cathy's mourning in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*

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In Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, illness and death cause characters to foresee, fear and react to other characters' deaths. In this article, I explore the significance of Cathy's anticipatory mourning of, and response to, the eventual actual deaths of her ailing father, Edgar, and her sickly cousin, Linton. Core 19th-century perspectives and fears relating to illness and death are both evident and contested in the representation of Cathy's anxiety and suffering. I also investigate how Cathy's grief is exacerbated by and affects the behaviour of other characters, notably Nelly, Linton, Heathcliff, Zillah and Hareton. The depiction of these characters' responses to Cathy's misery enriches their portrayal, implying that Cathy's fear and grief are integral to both the novel's plot and its character development.

**Cathy se rou in Emily Brontë se *Wuthering Heights*.** In Emily Brontë se *Wuthering Heights* noop siekte en sterftes karakters daartoe om ander karakters se dood vooruit te sien, te vrees en daarop te reageer. In hierdie artikel ondersoek ek die betekenis van Cathy se antisiperende rou op grond van die moontlikheid van en reaksie op die uiteindelijke werklike dood van haar ongestelde vader, Edgar, en haar sieklike neef, Linton. Prominente 19de-eeuse perspektiewe op en vrese rondom siekte en die dood word beskryf en bevaagteken in die uitbeelding van Cathy se angs en smart. Ek stel ook ondersoek in na die wyse waarop Cathy se hartseer vererger word deur die gedrag van ander karakters, in die besonder Nelly, Linton, Heathcliff, Zillah en Hareton, en hoe haar smart hulle beïnvloed. Die uitbeelding van hoe hierdie karakters op Cathy se lyding reageer, verryk hul karakterisering, wat impliseer dat Cathy se vrees en smart integraal is tot die roman se intrige en karakteruitbeelding.

## Introduction

When Heathcliff asks his daughter-in-law, Cathy, a new widow at the age of 17, how she feels now that her young husband, Linton, is dead after his illness, this is the response that Zillah reports to Nelly:

'He's safe, and I'm free,' she answered, 'I should feel well – but,' she continued with a bitterness she couldn't conceal, 'You have left me so long to struggle against death, alone, that I feel and see only death! I feel like death!' (Brontë [1847] 2003:294)

Her response shows relief, but no grief, and her overriding emotion is 'bitterness'. Her situation and reply (refracted through the narrative voices of the housekeepers Zillah and Nelly, and the frame narrator, Lockwood) epitomise some of the ambivalent and complex reactions to death and expectations surrounding death and mourning in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847).

In this article, I explore how Brontë's depiction of Cathy's reactions and feelings in this and other instances of illness and death engages with 19th-century expectations surrounding people's actions and emotions. I consider Cathy's responses to the anticipated and actual deaths of her father (Edgar Linton) and her cousin (Linton Heathcliff). I also look at the light cast on her feelings and reactions by other characters' interactions with her on these occasions, focusing on the behaviour of Nelly, Linton, Heathcliff, Zillah and Hareton. My study thus complements Laura Inman's (2008) valuable exploration of the centrality of death to Brontë's narrative and Dennis Bloomfield's (2011:290) assertion that it is a 'combination of [severe] illness, injury and death' that is 'responsible for all the significant elements of the plot'.

In her article "'The Awful Event'" in *Wuthering Heights*, Inman (2008) endeavours to remedy the omission of a discussion of the *centrality* of death ('the Awful Event') regarding Brontë's novel in the work of critics such as Ingrid Geerken (2004), Lakshmi Krishnan (2007), Graeme Tytler (2007)

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and Steve Vine (1999), who have highlighted death-related themes such as illness, religion, crypts and mourning in the novel. She argues that death is a key plot device in the narrative, because each of the 12 deaths mentioned in the text adds to both the plot and character development. She also holds that the narrative technique of the repetition of the death motif allows Brontë to show how characters reflect on their own and other characters' mortality and to respond to other characters' deaths. She supports her argument by exploring presentiments of death and ways in which characters' deaths influence the behaviour of others, focusing primarily on how Frances's death affects Hindley, how Catherine's<sup>1</sup> death influences Edgar and Heathcliff and how Heathcliff's death affects Hareton. However, she merely mentions the anxiety and grief that Cathy feels about her father and her cousin (and later, husband) in passing. This is the area that this article focuses on.

I first consider incidents that illustrate Cathy's fairly conventional feelings regarding the illness of her father and her cousin (anticipating the possibility of death) and then examine her unexpectedly unconventional but genuine responses to their impending and eventual actual deaths. In each case, I show the significance of these events for the outcome of the plot of the novel and the characterisation of Cathy and those who interact closely with her. Throughout, I bear in mind the multiple levels of narration in the novel, as each of these incidents is filtered by at least two voices: those of Lockwood (Heathcliff's tenant at Thrushcross Grange) and Nelly (Heathcliff's housekeeper at the Grange, formerly employed at Wuthering Heights). The narrative is also occasionally filtered through additional voices, such as that of Zillah, who works at the Heights when Heathcliff banishes Nelly from it. This form of narration is characteristic of Gothic narratives, as described by Laura Kranzler (2000:xviii) – a narrative strategy that 'typically involves the doubled framework of an old story being retold by the narrator, and removed in time [...] from the narrator and her or his audience'.

## Anticipatory mourning: The fear of loss

Nelly's account of the story of Cathy Linton begins when Catherine, whose story is the focus of the first half of the novel, dies about 2 hours after giving birth to Cathy prematurely. Cathy is left in the care of Nelly, who not only raises her but also takes it upon herself to relate Cathy's story to Lockwood. The significance of Cathy's story is frequently overlooked by critics, even though Nelly's and Lockwood's accounts of Cathy take up nearly the entire second half of the novel, and Nelly's narration is elicited by Lockwood's interest in Cathy. Krishnan (2007:37), for example, inaccurately asserts that 'Nelly's narrative skips over most of the period following [Catherine's] death, resuming close to Heathcliff's own' and that '[t]his suggests the relative

unimportance of those eighteen years, during which Heathcliff is [pre]occupied with his resolve for revenge'. In fact, these years are critical precisely because Cathy and her affection for Edgar, Linton and even the unreliable and unkind Nelly, which I consider in this article, are crucial to Heathcliff's 'resolve for revenge'.

Cathy has no memory of her mother or her mother's death, but this death shapes the pattern of her life into her teenage years, since she grows up within the *hortus conclusus* of the Grange and its park, shielded from society and any external influence by her nurse, Nelly, and her father, Edgar Linton. Edgar has withdrawn from society in the wake of his wife's death and lives only for his daughter, in memory of her dead mother (Brontë [1847] 2003:184–185). This seclusion also protects Cathy from contact with anyone from the Heights and the enmity of Heathcliff, who is plotting revenge on the Lintons, 'motivated by his grief over Catherine's death' (Geerken 2004:395). Cathy never goes beyond the boundaries of the Grange, except when she and her father go to church or go for walks together. Her keepsakes of her mother are a picture on the one side of a locket (the other side shows a picture of her father), and a painting of Catherine at the Grange. This is in keeping with 19th-century relic culture, where people would often cherish pictures of deceased loved ones or even keep relics, especially locks of their hair. Deborah Lutz (2011:130) points out that people believed that '[t]o possess a piece of the beloved might provide a link to that body lost; it might comfort with its talisman-like ability to contain, and prove the existence of, an eternity'. However, Cathy has no personal experience of illness or death at this point, despite the long shadow of her mother's death over her life.

This peaceful existence comes under threat about 13 years after Catherine's death, when Edgar goes to see his only sibling, Isabella, after she has written to let him know that she is dying. (In defiance of her brother's request that she keep away from Heathcliff, Isabella had eloped with Heathcliff and later had to escape from her abusive marriage to him by fleeing Gimmerton and settling close to London. Although divided, Edgar and Isabella later established a regular correspondence. However, Cathy never knew her aunt.) The reality of Isabella's death is kept at a distance from the cocoon in which Edgar has encased his daughter. After Isabella's death, Edgar brings Linton, Heathcliff and Isabella's son (and his nephew), to the Grange, in compliance with Isabella's dying wishes. 'Her demise [thus] provides the reason for Linton to join the story', as Bloomfield (2011:291) points out.

Cathy briefly sees her sickly cousin before Heathcliff claims him, and Edgar is forced to ask Nelly to take him to Wuthering Heights early the next morning. Cathy experiences her first sense of loss when little Linton thus disappears overnight. Given that she has no idea that he lives within walking or riding distance, at the Heights, he might as well have died. It is her later rediscovery of her cousin and the resurrection of her delight in having a cousin to 'pet' and love (Brontë [1847]

1. To avoid possible confusion between the two Catherine's in the novel, I refer to Catherine Earnshaw (the object of Heathcliff's love and Edgar Linton's wife) as 'Catherine' and to her daughter as 'Cathy'.



2003:201) that give rise to her subsequent encounters with death, both anticipated and actual.

### The possibility of losing her father

Cathy's next encounter with Linton results in an interesting interchange between Cathy and Nelly, which reveals 19th-century ideas about the family and death and some of the ambiguity surrounding Nelly's role as narrator and as Cathy's caregiver.

On her 16th birthday, Cathy ends up at Wuthering Heights on an ill-fated walk with Nelly, during which they encounter Heathcliff, who reintroduces Cathy to her cousin. When Edgar learns about this meeting, he forbids all further contact with the Heights. That evening, Nelly goes to Cathy's room and finds the girl crying. Believing that Cathy is crying because her father has forbidden her to go to the Heights (in fact, the soft-hearted Cathy is crying for her cousin's sake, as he will wait in vain for her promised visit the next day), Nelly tells her:

Oh, fie, silly child! ... If you had any real griefs, you'd be ashamed to waste a tear on this little contrariety. You never had one shadow of substantial sorrow, Miss Catherine. Suppose, for a minute, that master and I were dead, and you were by yourself in the world – how would you feel, then? Compare the present occasion with such an affliction as that, and be thankful for the friends you have, instead of coveting more. (Brontë [1847] 2003:223)

With this platitude on being 'thankful for the friends you have', Nelly draws on a conventional 19th-century sentiment regarding the importance of family (even though she is not related to Cathy) and the fear of losing and thereby being separated from loved ones. Philippe Ariès (1981) explains that Romanticism, with its emphasis on the individual and unrestrained passion, had transformed people's ways of relating to one another, as well as their perspectives on and anxieties relating to death:

The family replaced both the traditional community and the individual of the late Middle Ages and early modern times. ... Under these conditions, the death of the self had lost its meaning. The fear of death, born of the fantasies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was transferred from the self to the other, the loved one. But what the survivors mourned was no longer the fact of dying but the physical separation from the deceased. (pp. 609–610)

The fear of loss of members of her nuclear family would be particularly acute for Cathy, who has almost no human contact other than with her father and Nelly. Nelly's exploitation of such concerns to frighten the girl into forgetting about Linton seems particularly cruel – to both children. Nelly's threat is ultimately self-serving: Nelly is afraid of Heathcliff, but does not wish to be put to the inconvenience of having to keep too close a guard on Cathy. Nelly is also concerned that she may lose her position at the Grange if she evokes Edgar's displeasure by failing to protect Cathy. At this point, through Nelly's narrative to Lockwood, the reader is aware that Heathcliff has told her about his plan

to orchestrate a marriage between his son and the daughter of his enemy in order eventually to take possession of the Grange (Brontë [1847] 2003:208; 215). Moreover, the reader knows that Nelly has not warned Edgar of Heathcliff's scheme. Nelly's duplicity and culpability are compounded when she later fails to alert Edgar about Cathy's clandestine correspondence with Linton. Presumably, she fails to tell Edgar about the letter-writing not because of Cathy's wishes but, rather, because doing so might land Nelly in trouble – earlier, when Heathcliff secretly paid visits to Catherine, for instance, Nelly did not mind telling Edgar about them, although she had to have known what her tale-bearing would mean for Edgar and Catherine's marriage and the relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff, the disintegration of which is the cause of Heathcliff's desire for revenge. Taking this into account, Nelly may indeed be 'the villain' of *Wuthering Heights*, as James Hafley (1958:199) asserts – or, at least, a villain, particularly in her unkind and negligent treatment of Cathy.

Later, on a walk on a chilly and damp evening with Cathy amongst the reapers who are gathering the last of the year's harvest, Edgar catches a cold that settles on his lungs and forces him to stay indoors for most of the autumn and winter that follow. Soon, Cathy starts to fear that her father will not get better. Nelly and Cathy discuss Edgar's poor health. When Cathy shows concern for her father and really fears that she will lose him, Nelly's response is again problematic, as well as revealing. The housekeeper recounts their conversation to Lockwood:

'Catherine, why are you crying, love? ... You mustn't cry, because papa has a cold; be thankful it is nothing worse.' ... 'Oh, it will be something worse,' she said. 'And what shall I do when papa and you leave me, and I am by myself? I can't forget your words, Ellen, they are always in my ear.' ... 'It's wrong to anticipate evil – we'll hope there are years and years to come before any of us go – master is young, and I am strong, and hardly forty-five.' (Brontë [1847] 2003:231, *Brontë's emphasis*)

Earlier, Nelly attempted to manipulate Cathy to get her to stop crying about being kept from Linton by presenting the girl's grief as insignificant compared to the misery she would have to endure if she lost Nelly and Edgar and were left alone in the world – she drew on the possibility of Cathy's loss to frighten her. Now that Edgar actually has fallen ill and Cathy fears that he will die, Nelly dismisses the girl's fear and plays on her guilt by admonishing her to 'be thankful' that her father is not seriously ill, but simultaneously frightens her with the threat that she will invoke harm by 'anticipat[ing] evil'. Nelly's earlier words haunt Cathy. The housekeeper knows just as well as Cathy that Edgar may indeed die, but she neglects to assist Cathy in coming to terms with her father's impending death. Her rebuke that it is wrong to fear the event adds to Cathy's anxiety, showing that Nelly is as unfeeling now as she was before, when she drew on the girl's attachment to, and fear of, losing her loved ones to get her to forget about Linton. Nelly's comment, which Lockwood uncritically reports, is typical of the housekeeper's relating her tale in such a way as to present herself as 'the moral, rational hub of the tale,



holding everything together' (Whitley 2000:x). Presumably, she depicts herself in this light to lend credibility to what she relates to Lockwood: she portrays Cathy as childish, impressionable, overly emotional and demanding, in order to draw Lockwood, as an adult male listener who is possibly less sympathetic to children's concerns, into acquiescing in Nelly's lukewarm support for Cathy later. Her strategy appears to be successful, as Lockwood, who is 'gullible' and 'weak' (Hafley 1958:212), neither questions the truthfulness of Nelly's remarks about Cathy nor rebukes Nelly for the unsympathetic and unsupportive way in which she admits she reacted to Cathy's grief on this and other occasions.

Cathy disagrees with Nelly, asserting that it is not wrong of her to foresee her father's death, pointing to the death of her aunt, who was younger than her father. Nelly responds: 'Aunt Isabella had not you and me to nurse her' (Brontë [1847] 2003:231). In this manner, Nelly reinforces 19th-century emphasis on the value of nursing:

In a characteristically Victorian adaptation of the moral assumptions underlying the previous century's cult of sensibility, the shedding of tears over human distress was not in itself sufficient to attest to one's benevolence but required instead the practical demonstration of compassion that nursing affords. (Bailin 1994:11)

By responding in this way to Cathy's observation about Isabella's death, Nelly contrasts Edgar's situation with his sister's: she implies that Cathy need not concern herself over her father's well-being, because, unlike Isabella, he is neither alone nor without loved ones who can perform their duty towards him by nursing him back to health. This is disingenuous: like everyone else in Gimmerton, with the exception of Edgar, Nelly knows little, if anything, about Isabella's illness and final hours. Moreover, both Frances and Catherine died under Nelly's care (and Cathy is too inexperienced to tend Linton and make him a little more comfortable in the last days before his inevitable death from consumption). Nelly thus again attempts to dismiss the girl's fears, which are not unfounded. Nelly mendaciously portrays herself as a reliable and competent nurse and servant, when her record tells a different story. Once again, Lockwood fails to register the inconsistency in Nelly's account, suggesting that he is not astute enough to perceive Nelly's unreliability, self-interest and incompetence when it comes to looking after Cathy and nursing.

Although Nelly might have set Cathy at ease by highlighting this contrast between Isabella's and Edgar's circumstances (untruthful though her claim is), she cannot resist a didactic rider in the hope of nipping in the bud any ideas of future visits to Wuthering Heights:

'All you need do, is to wait well on your father, and cheer him by letting him see you cheerful; and avoid giving him anxiety on any subject ... I'll not disguise, but you might kill him, if you were wild and reckless, and cherished a foolish, fanciful affection for the son of a person who would be glad to have him in his grave – and allowed him to discover that you fretted over the separation, he has judged it expedient to make.' (Brontë [1847] 2003:231)

Instead of comforting Cathy, Nelly threatens that Cathy might kill her father if she were 'wild and reckless' enough to continue to cry over Linton, increasing Cathy's misery, adding to the guilt and anxiety she already experiences at being torn between her love for her father and her affection for Linton. This manipulation is again intended to protect Nelly's position at the Grange: Nelly's sinister insinuation that Cathy would be to blame if Edgar died diverts Cathy's and Lockwood's attention from Nelly's own inabilities and culpability, reinforcing the illusion of herself as sensible, knowledgeable and irreproachable. This method of ensuring Cathy's compliance with Nelly's wishes amounts to blatant psychological blackmail and exploits Cathy's naivety, as the girl has hitherto been surrounded by love and her father's protection and has little sense that anyone might lie to her or wish her anything but good.

### The possibility of losing Linton

Cathy is similarly manipulated by Heathcliff and, to a lesser degree, by Linton, who exploit her affection for Linton for their own objectives. Heathcliff's and Linton's manipulative behaviour and Cathy's and Nelly's responses to it shed some light on the characters of Heathcliff, Linton, Cathy and Nelly.

Heathcliff lets Cathy know that Linton is very sick and likely to die soon, hoping that her affection for Linton will compel her to visit the Heights. Accompanied by a reluctant Nelly, Cathy does what Heathcliff anticipated: she visits Linton. Both women see that Linton is very ill, but they react very differently to his plight. Cathy's response to her cousin's suffering reveals the depth of her youthful capacity for empathy and sympathy. Her response is deeply emotional: she pities him and wishes to comfort him – the loving and humane response that should underpin the conventions surrounding care for the sick and dying. However, she is also too naïve to realise that the petulant Linton takes advantage of his own illness and impending death to manipulate her into acceding to the tyranny of his incessant demands for attention and care. Nelly's reaction, on the other hand, is far more cynical, even heartless. Having witnessed Linton's tendency to complain and be selfish, Nelly quickly begins to dislike him. As Nelly later reports to Lockwood, she and Cathy discuss Linton on their way back to the Grange after their visit, and when Cathy asks her whether she likes Linton, she exclaims:

'Like him? ... Happily, as Mr Heathcliff conjectured, he'll not win twenty! ... I doubt whether he'll see spring, indeed – and small loss to his family, whenever he drops off; and lucky it is for us that his father took him – The kinder he was treated, the more tedious and selfish he'd be!' (Brontë [1847] 2003:242)

Unlike the young and naïve Cathy, Nelly has enough insight to identify Linton's propensity to be 'tedious and selfish' and manipulative. However, instead of tactfully alerting Cathy to these disagreeable qualities in Linton in order to steel her against his emotional blackmail, she horrifies the girl by expressing an utter disregard for Linton's life, describing his imminent death – or 'drop[ping] off' – as a 'small loss to his



family'. Moreover, she contradicts herself, now dismissing the 19th-century duties towards the dying that she herself implied earlier, in unfairly dismissing Cathy's concern about Edgar. She thus alters her stance on issues whenever it suits her. The scene suggests that, at best, Nelly tends to be 'self-contradictory' (Tytler 2008:48), and at worst, colludes, wittingly or unwittingly, in Cathy's future suffering at Heathcliff's hands. Nelly also tells Lockwood that Cathy 'waxed serious' at her reply to the question about liking Linton, deeply 'wounded' by her 'speak[ing] of his death so regardlessly' (Brontë [1847] 2003:242). She thus inadvertently reveals that she knows how much her words upset and hurt Cathy, but she does not appear to feel any remorse at her own callous (if not vindictive) remarks. By her own admission, she bullies Cathy by drawing on her affection for Linton. Again, Lockwood appears to be uncritical of Nelly's narrative, as he does not reprimand her for her cruelty, and uncritically accepts her version of events.

Subsequently, when Nelly's illness keeps her in bed for 3 weeks, Cathy begins to visit Linton. When she finds out about Cathy's visits to Linton, Nelly, angry about being disobeyed, tells Edgar, who forbids Cathy to go and see Linton again. While it seems as if Nelly is assisting Edgar by keeping Cathy out of Heathcliff's reach, apparently making up for her earlier ignorance or negligence, she fails to let Edgar know that Linton is dying, when she is well aware of it – she relates to Lockwood, for example, that, during her and Cathy's visit, when Cathy and Linton started arguing, Linton began to cough and kept coughing for 'so long' that it 'frightened' her (Brontë [1847] 2003:239). In addition, Cathy has already told Nelly that Linton started coughing up blood when he and Hareton were fighting during one of her visits to the Heights (Brontë [1847] 2003:251). These symptoms are typical of advanced tuberculosis. Bloomfield (2011) indicates that tuberculosis was one of the main causes of death in adults in the 19th century, when Brontë wrote her novel (indeed, Branwell, Emily and Anne Brontë all died of consumption):

It caused fever and cough with slow progression to weakness, weight loss, increasing shortness of breath and, towards the end, coughing up of blood. The consequence of this illness was understood by the physicians and the general public and the inevitability of the outcome was accepted. (p. 295)

Considering the prevalence of this disease, Nelly may be assumed to know that the 'coughing up of blood' indicates that the illness is well advanced and that Linton's death is imminent. Her failing to tell Edgar about this reveals not so much a tendency to be 'slow-witted' or 'uncomprehending', as Tytler (2008:48) supposes, but a lack of feeling. Given that Edgar honoured his dying sister's wishes, acting in keeping with 19th-century thought concerning duty towards the dying and attachment to loved ones, he might have attempted to find a way to let Cathy see her cousin, had he known about Linton's declining health. By keeping this information to herself, then, Nelly deprives Cathy and Edgar of the chance to support and care for their dying relative. Her actions expose her own hypocrisy again, considering the views she expressed earlier on the importance of caring for the dying. Clearly, she

honours convention and duty only when it suits her and she will happily shirk her responsibilities towards her employer and Cathy, as well as her human obligation to Linton, whom she does not like, and describes as 'the worst tempered bit of a sickly slip that ever struggled into its teens' and as a 'small loss to his family' if he were to die (Brontë [1847] 2003:242).

Nelly's failure to alert Edgar to Heathcliff's plan to have Cathy marry Linton, combined with her silence on the imminence of Linton's death, makes her partly to blame for the eventual success of Heathcliff's strategy. Persuaded both by Cathy and by Linton, with whom he has established a regular correspondence, Edgar agrees to let the cousins meet at some distance from the Heights from time to time, but this well-intended concession allows Heathcliff cynically to exploit Edgar's decency and Cathy's innocent sympathy. Because the boy is dying, Heathcliff has to force the marriage through as quickly as possible if he hopes to gain access to Cathy's future inheritance. To do this, he terrorises Linton, in ways that are never described in detail, to ensure that his son is so afraid of him that Linton will do whatever he demands. During one of Cathy's visits to Linton, Heathcliff arrives and Linton is instantly overcome with such terror that he can barely stand up. Linton 'shudders' if he touches him, so Heathcliff asks 'Cathy to '[b]e so kind as to walk home with him' (Brontë [1847] 2003:269). As a result of her sympathy for her terrified cousin, Cathy cannot bring herself to refuse Heathcliff's request, knowing a refusal will increase Linton's anxiety and subject him to further abuse at Heathcliff's hands. Once they are at Wuthering Heights, however, Heathcliff imprisons Cathy and Nelly, and tells them that he will let them go only if Cathy marries Linton.

In this manner, then, Heathcliff unscrupulously exploits Cathy's affection for Linton. Geerken (2004) claims that Heathcliff's:

prolonged anguish over Catherine's death and his meticulously executed plan of revenge produce the novel: the violence he inflicts on secondary characters is made necessary to a successful outcome to the plot. (p. 396)

This may be true, but it is made clear that Heathcliff is willing to abuse his own son if doing so will help him gain possession of the Grange. He openly enjoys the boy's terror and inflicts further emotional damage on him by making no secret of the fact that he despises Linton (just as he despised Isabella). Nelly reports to Lockwood that Heathcliff admits – even boasts – that he tolerates Linton only because he is 'prospective owner' of the Grange and does not want Linton to die until he is 'certain of being his successor' (Brontë [1847] 2003:208). The cruelty Heathcliff thus displays to his son and to Cathy suggests that Geerken's (2004) interpretation is incomplete: profound grief does not excuse Heathcliff's actions, as his 'plan of revenge' implicates others and reveals his utter inability or unwillingness to consider anyone's feelings but his own. Linton is little better than his father: he knows what his father intends to do, yet does not warn Cathy, but selfishly goes along with Heathcliff's scheming to protect himself. Like his father, then, Linton is focused solely on his own interests.



## Death and mourning

Heathcliff's stratagems succeed, and Cathy agrees to marry Linton, mainly to secure her release so that she can return to her dying father (Brontë [1847] 2003:275). Heathcliff keeps her at Wuthering Heights, denying her the chance to be with Edgar, even after she has married Linton. These events highlight Linton's cowardly selfishness and Heathcliff's vindictiveness towards Edgar in denying him his daughter's care at such a time.

Cathy's desperation to go home increases as her father's death becomes imminent. She is caught between her growing need to be with her dying father and a decreasing imperative to be with the selfish and unfeeling Linton, who is also dying. The contrasts between Cathy's mourning for her father and even for her husband, the generally callous responses to her anguish from Heathcliff, Linton and Zillah, and the covert attempts of Hareton to show some support, are telling.

### Cathy's desperation concerning and response to Edgar's death

Heathcliff and Linton keep Cathy from performing the duties she holds towards her dying father and subject Edgar to the suffering of dying unattended. They care about neither Edgar nor Cathy. Heathcliff only wants to gain possession of the Grange and is willing to torture his son and physically assault Cathy – he beats her about the head (Brontë [1847] 2003:271) – to achieve this end. Linton is more concerned about his own comfort than Cathy's pain, telling her to stop crying because he cannot sleep. He deliberately exposes her to Heathcliff's anger, as Nelly reveals to Lockwood by reporting Linton's remarks:

'And she won't give over, though I say I'll call my father – I did call him once; and he threatened to strangle her, if she was not quiet; but she began again, the instant he left the room; moaning and grieving, all night long, though I screamed for vexation that I couldn't sleep.' (Brontë [1847] 2003:280)

Lockwood does not comment on this part of the narrative. However, Nelly's covert relish in telling him all the details of the violence to which Cathy is subjected and of Cathy's anguish and desperation suggests that she expects Lockwood to be shocked by Heathcliff's and Linton's failure to honour Edgar's needs on his deathbed and Cathy's duty and obligation to be there, because the 'vital importance of family solidarity and sympathy in coping with death and participating in its rituals tended to be taken for granted in middle- and upper-class families' (Jalland 1996:26). The situation shows Heathcliff and Linton in a very poor light.

Heathcliff not only imprisons Cathy but also encourages Linton to mistrust and abuse her. Now that he has achieved what he wants, he can afford to amuse himself by teaching Linton to be cruel to her by playing 'the little tyrant' (Brontë [1847] 2003:274). Indeed, Heathcliff boasts that he can get Linton to 'torture any number of cats if their teeth be drawn, and their claws pared' (Brontë [1847] 2003:274), implying that, if Heathcliff breaks Cathy's spirit, Linton will happily torment

her. One of Heathcliff's strategies is to tell Linton that everything Cathy owns belongs to Linton. This results in Linton's claim that even Cathy's most prized possession, her locket with the portraits of her mother and father, belongs to him anyway. The ensuing argument, which attracts Heathcliff's attention, culminates in Heathcliff's violently striking Cathy down and confiscating Catherine's picture; Heathcliff then wrenches Edgar's picture from the locket before grinding it underfoot (Brontë [1847] 2003:281), destroying what would have been Cathy's only tangible reminder of her father once he is dead and buried. Linton's trying to take the piece of jewellery from Cathy shows his greed, selfishness, disregard for relic culture (Lutz 2011:130) and indifference to Cathy's suffering and imminent loss. Heathcliff's seizure of the portrait of Catherine testifies to his ongoing attachment to the deceased woman, while his crushing that of Edgar symbolises his hatred of the man and complete lack of concern for Cathy as a person and as a grieving daughter. This incident not only indicates the abuse Cathy suffers at the hands of Heathcliff and Linton but also marks the beginning of a striking change in Cathy: she begins to isolate herself emotionally. As she becomes increasingly desperate to go home and more and more distressed and ill owing to the grief she experiences, she turns 'so pale and wild' (Brontë [1847] 2003:281) that Linton becomes afraid of her. The fact illustrates Linton's self-absorption and complete disregard for Cathy's pain.

Nelly cannot persuade Linton to set Cathy free and is forced to go back to the Grange by herself. However, whether he is finally moved by his wife's anguish, afraid of what she has become, or is simply tired of her constant grieving, Linton secretly sets Cathy free the next morning, allowing her to run back to the Grange. As a result, she is able to be with her father when he dies. Nelly describes the girl's reaction to her father's death to Lockwood:

Whether Catherine had spent her tears, or whether the grief were too weighty to let them flow, she sat there dry-eyed till the sun rose – she sat till noon, and would still have remained, brooding over that death-bed, but I insisted on her coming away, and taking some repose. ... The funeral was hurried over; Catherine, Mrs Linton Heathcliff now, was suffered to stay at the Grange, till her father's corpse had quitted it. (Brontë [1847] 2003:284)

Whereas she cried while she was being imprisoned at the Heights, Cathy no longer weeps now that her father has died. Nelly's emphasis on the absence of Cathy's tears seems to imply that grief requires tears and that Cathy is unnatural in not weeping now. Cathy possibly 'spent her tears' at the Heights, knowing that Edgar's death was inevitable and suffering at the hands of her husband and father-in-law. Alternatively, her grief is now 'too weighty' to let her tears flow, as Nelly suggests, and her tremendous sorrow causes her to withdraw and fall silent, just as she did at the Heights after Heathcliff had hit her and destroyed the portrait of her father. Her being 'silent' now thus suggests that her suffering has become even more severe – maybe even that she has come to experience the 'real' grief that Nelly once claimed Cathy knew nothing about.



Because whatever money she once would have inherited has become her husband's, Cathy cannot pay for a funeral for her father, so payment for Edgar's funeral essentially depends on Heathcliff. Heathcliff fails to arrange for an appropriate funeral, however: acting under Heathcliff's orders, the lawyer, Mr Green, 'order[s] everything and everybody about the place' and 'would have carried his delegated authority to the point of insisting that Edgar Linton should not be buried beside his wife, but in the chapel, with his family', had there not been 'the will [...] to hinder that' (Brontë [1847] 2003:284). Hence, Edgar's funeral is 'hurried over' (Brontë [1847] 2003:284), both as an event and as a part of Nelly's account, highlighting Nelly's unease about the event, which she glosses over with a stereotypically sentimentalised account of Edgar's dying 'blissfully' (Brontë [1847] 2003:283). Pat Jalland (1996:12) mentions that rites such as funerals assist mourning individuals in coming to terms with their loss and that, in the 19th century, 'four primary forms of consolation' saw to the emotional needs of the bereaved, namely, 'religious belief, time, private and social memory, and the sympathy of friends and relatives'. By not giving Edgar a proper burial, Heathcliff denies Cathy the benefit of social memory (however slight, considering that she has no surviving relatives and few acquaintances), making it more difficult for her to deal with her loss. He also deprives her of whatever support she might have hoped for from Nelly at the Grange by forcing her to return to the Heights with him, thereby again revealing his indifference to Edgar's memory and Cathy's suffering and loss, as well as his insensitivity to all attachments but his own.

### Cathy's support for Linton and her reactions in the wake of his death

Because Heathcliff instructs her to stay at the Grange, Nelly can no longer see for herself how Cathy is keeping. However, she learns something about Cathy's life through conversations she has with Zillah, Heathcliff's housekeeper at the Heights. Zillah is as unreliable a narrator as Nelly: for one thing, she does not like Cathy, thinking her 'haughty', and, even according to the often self-interested, ignorant and negligent Nelly, Zillah is 'a narrow-minded selfish woman' (Brontë [1847] 2003:292). Zillah's account of Linton's death, which is communicated to Nelly and, through *her*, to Lockwood, draws attention to Heathcliff's heartlessness and Zillah's lack of sympathy for Cathy, but, ultimately, shows a different response from Hareton – a reaction that changes the course of both Cathy's and Hareton's fates.

At the Heights, Cathy is forced to take care of her dying husband by herself. Despite now knowing his true nature, she bravely takes on this duty, albeit without support, because Heathcliff has instructed Hareton and Zillah to keep away from her and Linton. Heathcliff makes no secret of the fact that the sooner Linton dies, the better, even telling Cathy: 'None here care what becomes of him; if you do, act the nurse; if you do not, lock him up and leave him' (Brontë [1847] 2003:293). Admittedly, even though Nelly seems to feel that Zillah is merely being shiftless, Zillah has reason to fear

to disobey Heathcliff. Also, Cathy herself has alienated Zillah and Hareton: the proud Cathy has offended Hareton by starting to cry when she learned that he is her cousin, unable to bear the thought of being related to someone whom she regards as unsophisticated (Brontë [1847] 2003:195), and by joining Linton in making fun of Hareton's inability to read (Brontë [1847] 2003:221). Cathy has also affronted Zillah by ignoring her when she was made to return to the Heights after Edgar's funeral, immediately 'run[ning] upstairs without even wishing good-evening to [Zillah] and Joseph', and 'shut[ting] herself into Linton's room' (Brontë [1847] 2003:292). Nevertheless, as Nelly disapprovingly tells Lockwood, Zillah is only too happy to abandon Linton, whom she refers to as a 'tiresome thing' (Brontë [1847] 2003:293). (Nelly conveniently forgets that she herself sees Linton in a similar light.) Consequently, Cathy is left to fend for herself and Linton in his last days and hours: when Cathy, realising that Linton is dying, asks Zillah to send for Heathcliff, the housekeeper ignores the request and even falls asleep after a quarter of an hour (Brontë [1847] 2003:293). Zillah shamelessly admits that she dismissed Cathy's distress at a point when common human kindness would have demanded a response. As a result, by the time Heathcliff hears Cathy ring the bell in Linton's room and comes to investigate, Linton is already dead.

This brings me back to the quote with which I started this article and to a closer look at Cathy's reply to Heathcliff's question about how she feels:

'He's safe, and I'm free,' she answered, 'I should feel well – but,' she continued with a bitterness she couldn't conceal, 'You have left me so long to struggle against death, alone, that I feel and see only death! I feel like death!' (Brontë [1847] 2003:294)

She starts by stating that Linton is 'safe'. Thus, she voices the conventional 19th-century belief that he has entered not a place of suffering (such as hell, belief in the reality of which had already waned by the mid-19th century), but 'the paradise of Christians', where he can look forward to 'a recreation of the affections of earth, purged of their dross, assured of eternity' (Ariès 1981:611). Next, she acknowledges a sense of relief, stating: 'I'm free'. This factual statement of her widowhood is not followed by any show of grief or sorrow, either on his behalf or her own. The remainder of her response, that she 'should feel well', but cannot find consolation in such orthodox beliefs at present, is a candid reflection of her state of mind. She is not bitter and depressed because of the loss of Linton, but because of a cumulative, pervasive *sense* of 'death' itself (encompassing her father's and Linton's deaths). This leaves her no room for sorrow, which is replaced by anger and bitterness at having been left 'so long to struggle against death, alone', Heathcliff and his household having heartlessly neglected to assist her in her time of need.

Even when Cathy has thus accused Zillah and the other inhabitants of Wuthering Heights of failing to support her, Zillah merely offers Cathy some wine to bring colour back into her face, which has gone deathly pale. Zillah either does



not realise or does not care that Cathy may have fallen ill herself and may have to be nursed back to health. Heathcliff begins to ignore Cathy, having 'perversely and ruthlessly devour[ed] the whole symbolic and economic scene of the Heights and the Grange, [and] incorporat[ed] them within his power and subdu[ed] them to his narcissism' (Vine 1999:176). Accordingly, both Heathcliff and Zillah neglect to help Cathy, still leaving her to fend for herself, without support and consolation, and, in doing so, cause Cathy to become even more bitter and angry.

Subsequently, Cathy refuses to interact with the other inhabitants of the Heights, convinced that none of them stood by her when she needed them. The onset of winter finally compels her to come downstairs: her room grows colder and she must warm herself by the fire in the hearth. Zillah remarks that Cathy is 'donned in black' (Brontë [1847] 2003:295). Her drawing attention to this is significant: it indicates that Cathy is the only one at the Heights wearing mourning. James Stevens Curl (1972) points out that:

families, including servants, were expected to wear mourning when a death occurred in the household. ... Mourning was obligatory ... and if the customs were not complied with, it was reckoned to be a sign of disrespect. (pp. 8–9)

By not wearing black, the other members of the household neglect to honour the memory of Cathy's husband, just as they did that of her father. Their show of disrespect possibly only adds to the anger and bitterness Cathy already feels.

Thus, enraged and embittered, Cathy responds scornfully to Hareton's asking her to 'come to the settle, and sit close by the fire' – she spurns his attempt to reach out to and be reconciled with her, accusing him, along with the rest of the household, of failing to support her, and 'reject[ing] any pretence at kindness [they] have the hypocrisy to offer' (Brontë [1847] 2003:297). Zillah mentions to Nelly that Cathy will 'snap at the master himself; and, as good as dares him to thrash her; and the more hurt she gets, the more venomous she grows' (Brontë [1847] 2003:297). Nelly, who is trying to explain Cathy's nature and behaviour to Lockwood, as he requested at the start of the novel, is inclined to be indignant at Zillah's comment. However, Lockwood's own observations bear out how much Cathy's demeanour has altered and how bitter she has become: when he takes Cathy a letter from Nelly, Lockwood considers that Cathy 'does not seem so amiable ... as Mrs Dean would persuade [him] to believe' (Brontë [1847] 2003:299). He conceitedly concludes that Cathy 'probably cannot appreciate a better class of people, when she meets them', because she is '[l]iving among clowns and misanthropists' (Brontë [1847] 2003:304). Because his vanity has been hurt, he questions Nelly's account of Cathy as being too partial towards her.

Although Cathy is thus denied the consolation provided by social memory and any support or kindness, the anguish she feels is finally alleviated by two events: firstly, Zillah quits Heathcliff's service. As a result, Heathcliff asks Nelly, to whom Cathy is strongly attached, to return to the

Heights. In addition, Heathcliff begins to withdraw and starve himself, increasingly consumed by his longing to join Catherine in death – a preoccupation that is possibly intensified by Lockwood's report of having seen Catherine's ghost. Consequently, Cathy and Hareton are thrown together more and more. Consoled by Zillah's and Heathcliff's absence, Nelly's company and the passing of time, Cathy begins to feel less miserable and reaches out to Hareton, who similarly reaches out to her. When she learns that Hareton has been a friend to her all along, she admits that she 'didn't know' about everything he had done for her, and apologises for having treated him unfairly, explaining that she did so only because she was 'miserable and bitter at every body' (Brontë [1847] 2003:313). Even though he does not do so straight away, Hareton eventually forgives Cathy – being 'the only character in the novel to be brought up without any religious instruction or influence' and yet being:

the readiest not only to feel remorse and to express contrition for his anger or acts of violence, but [also] to bear no grudge against those who have hurt his feelings. (Tytler 2007:52)

Unlike the unfeeling Heathcliff, Linton, Zillah and Nelly, then, Hareton is not only intuitively fair, kind and caring, even if in an initially clumsy way, but also forgiving. As a result, Hareton and Cathy become allies, and even Nelly is ultimately pleased that Cathy showed no interest in Lockwood – or that Lockwood lost interest in Cathy – and will marry Hareton, instead.

## Conclusion

The depiction of Cathy's anticipating and later mourning Edgar's and Linton's deaths, refracted as it is through the narrative voices of Zillah, Nelly and Lockwood, draws attention to some of the reactions to death and feelings and expectations surrounding death and mourning in *Wuthering Heights*. The portrayal of Cathy's anxiety and grief regarding her father's and her cousin's deaths casts light on Cathy's character. As I have shown, she is naïve, impressionable, overly emotional and proud, but also loving and sympathetic. Her fear and grief concerning the anticipated deaths of her father and her cousin are conventional. However, the actual death of her father elicits a mourning too deep for conventional tears, while her reaction to the death of her cousin (and later husband) is unconventional, as she experiences more relief, bitterness and anger than grief, problematising some of the accepted responses to death.

Cathy's responses to death are also integral to the plot of the novel and to the character development of those who interact with her. Heathcliff's and Linton's actions in relation to Cathy, in particular their exploitation and abuse of her vulnerability and capacity for love, are disturbing. In Linton's case (even given his terminal illness and terror of Heathcliff), his readiness to be petulant and selfish, and his tendency to enjoy hurting Cathy, make him an unlikeable character. Heathcliff's ruthless bullying and willingness to





destroy his own son and Cathy, the daughter of the woman he loved, are equally reprehensible. His much-vaunted love for Catherine cannot excuse the means he uses to achieve his ends.

Although Nelly attempts to depict herself as conventionally sensible and kind, her own narrative convicts her of behaviour towards Cathy that reveals her unkindness, ignorance and occasional dereliction of duty. It also shows her propensity to contradict herself and be hypocritical. Zillah, as reported by Nelly, is also exposed as an unfeeling, self-absorbed, unmindful, shiftless person who will not risk getting into trouble with a violent master such as Heathcliff, even when her compliance adds to Cathy's suffering.

By contrast, Hareton shows compassion to Cathy (even though she does not see this initially). His kindness and willingness to forgive initiate her return to wholeness and to her loving self, as time begins to heal her mourning.

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### Competing interests

I declare that I have no financial or personal relationship(s) which may have inappropriately influenced me in writing this article.

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