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The third lecture

The precariousness of social class

Given that Catherine and Heathcliff's love is based upon their refusal to change over time or embrace difference in others, it is fitting that the disastrous problems of their generation are overcome not by some climactic reversal, but simply by the inexorable passage of time, and the rise of a new and distinct generation. Ultimately, *Wuthering Heights* presents a vision of life as a process of change, and celebrates this process over and against the romantic intensity of its principal characters. The Precariousness of Social Class As members of the gentry, the Earnshaws and the Lintons occupy a somewhat precarious place within the hierarchy of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British society.

At the top of British society was the royalty, followed by the aristocracy, then by the gentry, and then by the lower classes, who made up the vast majority of the population. Although the gentry, or upper middle class, possessed servants and often large estates, they held a nonetheless fragile social position. The social status of aristocrats was a formal and settled matter, because aristocrats had official titles. Members of the gentry, however, held no titles, and their status was thus subject to change. A man might see himself as a gentleman but find, to his embarrassment, that his neighbors did not share this view. A discussion of whether or not a man was really a gentleman would consider such questions as how much land he owned, how many tenants and servants he had, how he spoke, whether he kept horses and a carriage, and whether his money came from land or "trade"—gentlemen scorned banking and commercial activities. Considerations of class status often crucially inform the characters' motivations in *Wuthering Heights*. Catherine's decision to marry Edgar so that she will be "the greatest woman of the neighborhood" is only the most obvious example. The Lintons are relatively firm in their gentry status but nonetheless take great pains to prove this status through their behaviors. The Earnshaws, on the other hand, rest on much shakier ground socially. They do not have a carriage, they have less land, and their house, as Lockwood remarks with great puzzlement, resembles that of a "homely,

northern farmer” and not that of a gentleman. The shifting nature of social status is demonstrated most strikingly in Heathcliff’s trajectory from homeless waif to young gentleman-by-adoption to common laborer to gentleman again (although the status-conscious Lockwood remarks that Heathcliff is only a gentleman in “dress and manners”). From another point of view, there was increasing tension among social classes in England during Brontë's lifetime.

The Industrial Revolution, which began in the 1770s, was in full swing, and the middle class was growing. However, an upper class of nonworking landowners living off inherited or invested money, such as the fictional Earnshaws or Lintons, still thrived, and subscribed to a strict division between classes. Servants were considered underlings, there to do the bidding of their masters, and they were expected to know their place and stay there. Nor was earning one's money a guarantee of attaining higher social status. Land and property were generally inherited from one generation to the next. The upper classes preferred to marry within their ranks to ensure the "purity" of their social class.

Marrying up or down the social ladder, as Isabella Linton does with the lower-class Heathcliff, could lead to scandal and even exile. When Heathcliff pursues his vendetta against the Lintons and the Earnshaws by acquiring their estates, he deprives the families of properties they held for generations. Gypsies Heathcliff is looked upon as an inferior outsider by many characters in the novel due to his dark hair and eyes, a sign of his supposed Gypsy origins. This is typical of romanticized notions about Gypsies during the Victorian period. The Gypsies, or Roma, had arrived in England from India around the early 16th century. They were nomadic traders, entertainers, or seasonal workers who traveled in caravans and, with the development of England's roads, were often seen in cities and towns throughout England. They were viewed with fascination both because they were seen as foreigners and because their nomadic lifestyle was so far outside of typical Victorian social norms. However,

Brontë leaves Heathcliff's true ethnic origin unknown. Heathcliff is not necessarily a gypsy; he is only labeled as such by the other characters, which is more a testament to the general dislike and stereotyping of Gypsies, and how anyone not British might be called a Gypsy. Consumption Life expectancy in Victorian England was around 40 years, based on location, profession, and social class. Consumption, another name for tuberculosis, was prevalent throughout the 1800s, killing one in five people. The symptoms included fevers, a hoarse throat, coughing blood, and chest pains.

The disease often lingered for years as the patient wasted away, which explains Heathcliff's horrified reaction to Cathy's appearance before her death. Pregnancy was believed to worsen consumption, but women with the disease were still expected to maintain domestic life and produce heirs. In the early 1800s, before the disease was known to be infectious, there was a romantic perception that consumption elevated the soul and cultivated artistic sensibilities. The Role of Women The laws of ownership and inheritance of land for women at the time depicted in the novel and during Brontë's life are accurately portrayed in *Wuthering Heights*. Upon marriage, the control of any property or other financial assets belonged by law to a woman's husband. Divorce was virtually unheard of, and women were often placed in a position of dependency on their husbands for life. In addition, women were expected to downplay their sexuality, being chaste before marriage, then wholesome and maternal once they married.

However Cathy acts with authority and control over Heathcliff, and although there are no sex scenes between Cathy and Heathcliff in the novel, their fiery, passionate exchanges, especially when Cathy is married to another man, would have been enough to scandalize Victorian readers. Good versus Evil An exploration of religious-based ideas of good and evil create the primary theme in *Wuthering Heights*, and the themes of judgment versus pity, love and obsession,

and violence and revenge, which are also religiously rooted, support it. The four lesser themes indicate individual choices, which add up to either good or evil. Pity, humility, love and forgiveness—the opposite of revenge—add up to choosing good; judgment, pride, obsession, and violence add up to choosing evil. The first half of the novel explores the idea of natural inclinations toward one or the other—good or evil—through a repetition and juxtaposition of devil and angel imagery and biblical references as the narrator,

Mrs. Dean, wonders if Heathcliff and Cathy are, or will turn out to be, good or evil. During this section, Brontë explores how an environment might influence characters toward good or evil. Ideas of freewill and personal choice to suffer begin in the middle of the narrative around the time when Hindley renounces God and spirals into villainy. Once Brontë's complex argument is in place and ideas of natural character tendencies, role of environment, and freewill are established, the second half of the novel shows individual characters, who lean toward the good—Catherine, Isabella, Hareton, Edgar, and Mrs. Dean—battling evil represented by Heathcliff. Then the theme culminates with Heathcliff's ultimate choice between good and evil. His choice locks him out of heaven and casts him into a hellish state, condemned to spiritually wander the moors with Cathy, who also rejected heaven and religion when she was alive. Mrs. Dean's character is the representative of the good qualities of love, pity, humility, and forgiveness. Heathcliff and Cathy represent the evil choices of violence, revenge, pride, selfishness, judgment, and obsession.

Joseph's character stands in the middle, representing religious hypocrisy, as he believes he is good, but having no qualities of love or the good established in the novel (pity, humility) serves to create an environment on the side of evil instead of good. Judgment versus Pity Brontë differentiates between biblical judgment, as reserved for the divine, and personal judgment between individuals, which is always accompanied with a choice between judgment and pity. Generally, a lack of pity leads to pain, injustice, and suffering for the person judged, making the thematic statement that to judge others is harmful to them, unjust, and not a

right reserved for human beings. Repeatedly, the reader is provoked to feel pity over judgment for the characters, even Heathcliff and Hindley, and shown the disturbing results of an absence of pity, such as Linton's treatment of Catherine and his ensuing horrible death. Commentary on class distinctions is woven into the judgment versus pity theme.