

Connotations and Significance of the Dogs in Wuthering Heights

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Abstract

Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* makes good use of symbolism and imagery, the unique writing techniques that infuses her work with deeper and broader connotations. This paper explores the role of dogs in the novel's characterization, plots and themes from the perspective of symbolism and imagery. Dogs in *Wuthering Heights* may serve as connections for complex relationships among the characters, foreshadowing or facilitators of the plot, and interpreters of the multiple themes.

Keywords

Wuthering Heights; Dogs; Symbolism; Imagery.

1. Introduction

Although *Wuthering Heights* is the only novel that Emily Bronte has ever written, her position in English literature hasn't been shaken up by that. "Emily Bronte works not in ideas but in symbols" (Kettle 55) and imagery to explore the inner world of the characters, elaborate the story plots and interpret the connotations of the themes. Both of symbolism and imagery are vehicles employed to convey the underlying meanings in an indirect way. However, there are subtle differences between them: while symbols are real existences in the novel, images are things imagined "for the sake of the comparison" (Marsh 78), usually appearing in the form of similes or metaphors. Since major symbols and images like moors and windows are exhaustively researched, this paper attempts to focus on the dog symbolism or imagery.

2. Dogs as Connections for Complex Relationships between the Characters

In the novel, people's animalistic characteristics seem to be inferred from the dogs. But since characters' behaviors are intertwined with each other's, the characteristic meanings embodied in the dogs are not isolated. Therefore, it'd be better to discuss the complex relationships between the characters.

2.1. Relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine

Heathcliff are frequently described as dogs. In chapter fifteen, when Catherine is dying, Nelly observes the eerie scene that "he [Heathcliff] gashed at me, and foamed like a mad dog, and gathered her to him with greedy jealousy." (Bronte 125). Here behaves as "a mad dog" who expresses his fierce affection by the "frantic caresses" (126). Therefore, the imagery of a violent dog implies Heathcliff's strong love for Catherine although such love is fraught with cruelty, violence and pain.

In turn, Catherine never ceases loving Heathcliff. Trapped in the "shatter prison" (125) of the unfortunate marriage, Catherine heartily desires for Heathcliff's company. When he approaches Thrushcross Grange, Nelly observes a large dog "raise its ears, as if about to bark, and then smoothing them back, announce by a wag of the tail" (123). Raised in Thrushcross Grange, the dog would have shown animosity against the strangers, but it welcomes Heathcliff by wagging its tail. This dog symbol implies its owner's welcome for the visitor, namely, Catherine's desire

for Heathcliff. So in spite of their separation, they still bear inmost fidelity to each other, which is visualized by the dog symbols and imagery.

2.2. Relationship among Other Characters

When Isabella quarrels with Catherine over Heathcliff's love, she degrades Catherine as "a dog in the manger" (80), complaining that Catherine has occupied Heathcliff's heart. Isabella uses the dog idiom to show her envy and malice for Catherine. Additionally, Isabella's attitudes can be revealed in dog Fanny. As an innocent pet kept by Linton family, Fanny appears to be "a heap of warm hair" (38). Ironically, after bitten by dog Skulker, Catherine is carefully ensconced in Thrushcross Grange where Isabella "dried and combed her beautiful hair" (40), which resembles Isabella's stroking Fanny. It seems that "Catherine takes the places of the desired pet" (Marsh 97). Catherine infringes her interests, in analogy with a dog spoiling the fun of its owner, leading to the change in her attitudes, from pampering affection to vicious hatred, which corresponds to her indifference to the hanging of Fanny.

This chapter mainly discusses the two group of relationships above, but relationships among other characters can also be explained by the usage of dog symbolism and imagery, which waits for your further exploration.

3. Dogs as Foreshadowing or Facilitators of the Plot

Dog symbolism and imagery are effective tools for facilitating and foreshadowing the plot in *Wuthering Heights*. One the one hand, occasions with dogs involved somehow change the direction of the story, thus giving momentum to the plot or detonate critical events. On the other hand, dogs may serve as some implicit allusions to the impending or further future events.

3.1. Dogs as Foreshadowing of the Plot

Bronte keeps using dogs to foreshadow or indicate the good or bad. When Mr. Earnshaw sees child Heathcliff "starving, and houseless, and as good as dumb in the streets of Liverpool" (Bronte 29), he takes "it" to Earnshaw family. The diction chosen by Bronte may imply that Heathcliff is like a poor stray dog. But raised domestically doesn't infuse complete humanistic characteristic into him: " 'Off, dog!' cried Hindley, threatening him with an iron weight"(31). Hindley, the rightful heir of Earnshaw family, treats him like a "dog". This comparison could subtly foreshadow Heathcliff's incapability for integrating into Earnshaw family and his attempt to get his own back on them.

3.2. Dogs as Facilitators of the Plot

Unlike lovely friends, dogs in *Wuthering Heights* are particularly aggressive beings which are sicced to attack the strangers. In Chapter two, Joseph calls Lockwood a lantern thief and orders Gnasher and Wolf to bite him, which is a turning point of the plot. It's his injury that enables him to lodge in Catherine's room where he reads her diary and dreams about the past twenty years, thus unfolding the core story. Another important dog attack happens in Thrushcross Grange where Catherine is bitten by a bulldog Skulker and is invited to the house and then becomes part of the family. This symbolic incident not only changes the plot, but moves it forward smoothly. In addition, the designed name "Skulker" may be an implicit ominous sign of Catherine's death since she will be constantly "bitten" by her marriage. So the dog symbol here seems to have multi-functions for the plot.

In a nutshell, as images or scenes occur throughout the whole novel, never are dogs insignificant or irrelevant to the story.

4. Dogs as Interpreters of the Multiple Themes

It's said that "the novel is many-layered, and numerous apparent 'themes' are integrated into character, dialogue, events, and narrative standpoint throughout text" (Marsh 162). Therefore, it will be impossible to directly interpret all the themes of the entire novel through a single approach. This paper simply explores some subjects and humanity is perceived as the motif integrating with dog-related sub-topics.

4.1. Humanity in Conflict between Nature and Civilization

The dissimilarities between *Wuthering Heights* and *Thrushcross Grange*, the settings of the novel, can be seen from the dogs kept in them. Dogs in *Wuthering Heights* are violent and vicious. Gnasher and Wolf threaten Lockwood under Joseph's command and when Juno assaults Lockwood for his caress, Heathcliff warns him that " 'she's not accustomed to be spoiled—not kept for a pet'" (Bronte 5), which reveals that the dogs in *Wuthering Heights* are raised for security purpose rather than companionship purpose. But in its counterpart *Thrushcross Grange*, pet dog Fanny is a vulnerable being that is spoiled by people but hanged by Heathcliff. Conclusion can be drawn that while dogs in *Wuthering Heights* represent for nature, *Thrushcross Grange's* may refer to civilization.

However, under such "seeming peaceful civilization" and "the guise of bourgeois warmth" lies human hypocrisy (Xiong 57). Bourgeoisie's selfishness and indifference are evident in some symbolic incidents that Skulker bites Catherine and that Lintons have Fanny "neraly pulled in two" (Bronte 38).

When Isabella intends to befriend Hareton who responses with a threat to set the bulldog Throtter on her (107), which uncovers the irreconcilable conflict between nature and civilization. In the sense, the contrast between the atmospheres of two houses and conflict of human nature are obviously disclosed by their respective dogs.

4.2. Humanity in Conflict between Love and Revenge

Wuthering Heights has long been called "a great poem of love and hate". Emily Bronte's full length study of "human nature—its impulses and its desires" and "its loves and its hates" (Watson 87)—deepens the theme of love and revenge, which intertwine with each other, forming a circular manner.

Hate comes from the loss of love and revenge is rooted in the desire for love. Hanging Fanny is Heathcliff's revenge on Linton family who has deprived him of love; Abused like a "dog", he retaliates against Earnshaw family frantically. Hareton's hanging a little dog awakens Isabella from her deformed love for Heathcliff (Bronte 141). These dog symbols or imagery imply the change or growth in characters, adding emotional weight to the themes.

Dogs not only suggest "humanity distortion and perversion", but "the return of distorted humanity" (Yuan 35). The second generation is introduced by a dog battle: "They had a smart battle, before their owners could separate them: that formed an introduction" (Bronte 153). Fighting dogs symbolize their owners' initial resentment for each other while the separation indicates the end of previous grudge and the advent of love and peace between the second generation.

Eventually, such conflict will "reach the calm harmony like the cyclical process in nature" (Gao 53). In the end of the story, Lockwood finds that he has "neither to climb the gate, nor to knock" (Bronte 234) because there are no longer guarding dogs. The disappearance of dogs means the newly sprout love and bright new life in wake of the revengeful tensions.

5. Conclusion

By focusing on three dimensions of the novel—characteristics, plot, and theme—the paper explores the connotations and significance of the dogs in *Wuthering Heights*. Dogs infuse some animalistic attributes into the characters, and reveal the intricate relationships among them. Bronte employs various dog-related incidents to drive, change and foreshadow the plot. Dog symbolism and imagery are also desirable vehicles to probe into the theme of humanity. Humanity embodied in either the conflicts between nature and civilization or the circulation of love and hate can be subtly revealed by the dogs.

To draw a conclusion, the dogs in *Wuthering Heights* could have profound connotations as they serve as key connections for the complex relationships among characters, facilitators or foreshadows of the plot, and interpretations of the multiple themes. Therefore, dog symbolism and imagery really endow the story with power and profoundness.

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