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'Wuthering Heights' is a stark psychological drama

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Oct. 17, 2012 NCR Today

Director/writer Andrea Arnold's anti-romantic narrative is a journey to the center of human darkness that perhaps for the first time depicts what Emily Brontë was trying to say in her 1847 story, *Wuthering Heights* -- her only novel.

Mr. Earnshaw (Paul Hilton) brings home to his bleak farm a black child he found wandering the streets of Liverpool because it is the Christian thing to do. He has the boy baptized and names him Heathcliff (Solomon Glave/James Howson). The child bolts, and we think it is because he does not understand. He finds a friend in Cathy (Shannon Beer/Kaya Scodelario), the daughter of the house, and they roam the moors together. When Earnshaw dies, his son, Hindley (Lee Shaw), takes over the farm and the cruelty begins. One day, Cathy is hurt on the moor, and the wealthy family at Thrushcross Grange takes her in for five weeks to recover. Cathy loves Heathcliff but agrees to marry Edgar Linton (James Northcote) because of what he can offer her. Heathcliff flees and returns a wealthy man a few years later. He spends time with Cathy and upsets everything. He marries Isabella (Nichola Burley), Edgar's sister. At first she is smitten, but then realizes it is a cruel ruse to torment Cathy, who is dying.

This new film spends the first hour, maybe more, on Heathcliff and Cathy's childhood. It is no superficial romance and there is no happy ending, unlike the supernatural one imagined for the 1939 William Wyler version starring Orson Welles and Merle Oberon. While this new rendering of the story might still find a place in the "gothic romance" genre, there is no doubt that "psychological" is the main descriptor.

What was Emily Brontë, who died at the age of 30, thinking about when she wrote *Wuthering Heights*? Which character or characters in the story did she identify with? Did she see herself in more than one? After the press day with Andrea Arnold a couple of weeks ago, I have greater respect for this second of the Brontë siblings. Themes of feminism, race, culture and social mores, class, religion, child abuse, domestic violence, cruelty, sexual longing and transgression, and identity, like nothing we have ever seen, are present in the original story and rise boldly from the scenes of this current film for all to see. And don't forget mental illness or what is now called borderline personality disorder. Emily didn't have the terminology, but she seems to have understood the reality.

"Emily was playing with something that she did not fully commit to," Arnold said, adding that she thinks Emily was exploring her own reality that people treat "difference with cruelty."

When I asked Arnold what the scene of Heathcliff with Cathy's body means at the end, a parallel to a scene when they tussle in the mud as children, she declined to answer, saying that figuring this out is up to the audience.

In the novel, the key narrator is Nelly Dean, a servant whose perspective is mediated by that of Lockwood, her employer, who wants to know about his landlord, Heathcliff, who lives across the moor.

But the film drops these characters, as well as Cathy and Heathcliff's children, and allows Heathcliff to take

over, often seeming to perch the camera lens on his shoulder. This personal, masculine point-of-view technique and the total absence of music untethers a tale of a desire so consuming that feels as harsh, wild, unwelcoming and cold as the moors of northeastern England. Whatever sympathy we might have had for Heathcliff vanishes when he returns to pursue his obsession.

The performances, especially by newcomer James Howson, are as unembellished and austere as the terrain. There is no soul or generosity in "Wuthering Heights," and this creates a vacuum that cannot, and is not, filled by the narrative.

Perhaps Emily's imagination has finally achieved its authentic external manifestation in this visit to Wuthering Heights. It's no walk in the park.

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