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Release the Bats! Vampire Figures in Emily Brontë's *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*

SUMMARY This paper reflects briefly on Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* in the context of Donna J. Haraway's metaphor of the vampire. Haraway's theory enables us to look at the well-described conflicts and tensions of the novel from a new angle, making us rethink our attitude to the Other, while preserving the text's infamous opacity of meaning. The purpose of this paper is twofold: to explore briefly the motif of the vampire, which is already there in Brontë's text; and to comment on how the metaphor of the vampire – passing through Haraway's reformulation – affects the novel's message. As a result, this new analytical and interpretative perspective allows us to take a fresh look at one of the Victorian classics when teaching it at history of English literature course at the university level.

Emily Brontë's *WUTHERING HEIGHTS* belongs to the category of texts that for several decades have enjoyed popularity both with critics and so-called ordinary readers. As a result, it appears as a typical choice for teaching about the Victorian and Romantic novel in university literary courses. Nonetheless, its popularity with non-expert readers should not obscure the fact that Brontë's only novel has been responded to by critics of various methodological orientations, including essays and books written from cultural, deconstructive, feminist, Marxist, and/or psychoanalytic critical standpoints¹. In this light it seems to be the duty of a university teacher to expose her/his students to different possibilities in approaching a literary text. As long as teaching literature – in the form of developing analytical and interpretative skills – has its place in the process of educating teachers of English, it is worth providing students with opportunities to discuss such literary works that both confront the reader with the most fundamental questions pertaining to the human condition and are open to various interpretations. It is my strong belief that this should be done in the name of intellectual freedom in pursuit of truths and in the spirit of tolerance of a variety of points of view and to otherness.

¹ Essays representative of these critical schools are included in: E. Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, (ed. by) L. H. Paterson, Boston 1992.



In this short essay I would like to reflect briefly on Emily Brontë's *WUTHERING HEIGHTS* in the context of Donna J. Haraway's metaphor of the vampire. Haraway's theory enables us to look at the well-described conflicts and tensions of the novel from a new angle, making us rethink our attitude to the Other, while preserving the text's infamous opacity of meaning. My purpose is twofold: to explore briefly the motif of the vampire, which is already there in Brontë's text; and to comment on how the metaphor of the vampire – passing through Haraway's reformulation – affects the novel's message.

In *MODEST_WITNESS* Haraway introduces the figure of the vampire whom she describes as

the one who pollutes lineages on the wedding night; the one who effects category transformations by illegitimate passages of substance; the one who drinks and infuses blood in a paradigmatic act of infecting whatever poses as pure; the one who eschews sun worship and does its work at night; the one who is undead, unnatural, and perversely incorruptible.... A figure that both promises and threatens ... sexual mixing, the vampire feeds off the normalized human, and the monster finds such contaminated food to be nutritious².

In Haraway's deliberations vampires are also presented as "narrative figures with specific category-crossing work to do" whose "essence ... is the pollution of natural kinds" whereas their "existence ... tropes the purity of lineage, certainty of kind, boundary of community, order of sex, closure of race, inertness of objects, liveliness of subjects, and clarity of gender. Desire and fear are the appropriate reactions to vampires"³.

In *WUTHERING HEIGHTS* all categories and boundaries that initially appear to be stable and permanent like family, class, gender, heaven and hell⁴, life and death, object and subject are challenged and violated in the course of events that lead to final discomposure of recognizable patterns organizing human social and personal functioning. In this light Emily Brontë's novel can be perceived as 'essentially' about the pollution of 'natural' kinds. The fact that the novel ends with a re-establishment of the patriarchal structure with its indisputable code of order and hierarchy only enhances the reader's conviction of the fundamental disruptiveness of the Catherine and Heathcliff story. Taking into consideration the openness of the ending, we do not

² D. J. Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan@_Meets_Onco-Mouse™*, New York 1997, p. 214.

³ Ibidem, p. 79-80.

⁴ See: S. M. Gilbert and S. Gubar, *Looking Oppositely: Emily Brontë's Bible of Hell*, [in:] *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven and London 1979.

know how the newly established order is going to work in practice, especially in the context of Catherine and Heathcliff being seen on the moors – they are as if lurking in the wings, although the stage is not theirs at the moment. The paradise of clear-cut divisions and norms seems to have been lost forever, and any attempt to return to the state of innocence can only be provisional, whereas innocence itself, since now it cannot be anything but self-conscious, must be artificial.

Even though Haraway originally implements the vampire metaphor for analyzing the notion of race, which in this case means deconstructing it so that it is rediscovered as a non-essential, historically and socially coded Western invention, its usefulness consists in the fact that, as Bartsch, DiPalma and Sells put it, “[a]s an undead figure, the vampire confuses classifications, violates taxonomies” and is “a way to figure the pollution of [ALL] ‘natural’ categories”⁵. Our specific interest here, however, is that “the vampire is about nongenetic generations, ironic kinships, and familial relations in the realm of the living, the dead, and the undead”⁶. *WUTHERING HEIGHTS* can be presented as a family drama about blood relationships including incest (two marriages between first cousins take place in the novel) and their alternatives.

Traditionally the vampire is a sexually powerful male character with apparently irresistible sexual allure⁷ who thrives on blood, the liquid of the body, the fluid of life. Simultaneously, the vampire has power to make new vampires through passing on the Dark Gift – yet this sort of generation is, perplexingly in the context of the just mentioned sexual encoding, nongenetic.

The most obvious vampire figure in *WUTHERING HEIGHTS* is Heathcliff. There is enough textual evidence in Brontë's novel to allow us to perceive him in this way. He himself, when talking about his hatred and contempt for Edgar, mentions tearing the rival's heart out and drinking his blood⁸.

⁵ I. Bartsch, C. DiPalma, and L. Sells, *Witnessing the Postmodern Jeremiad: (Mis)understanding Donna Haraway's Method of Inquiry*, “Configurations”, 2001, Vol. 9 (1), p. 144.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 144.

⁷ Bartsch, DiPalma and Sells write about the “masculinized power, and misogyny of the vast majority of vampire figures and their allies in popular culture” (ibidem, p. 146). Maria Janion associates Leonard Wolf's understanding of Dracula as a psychological allegory of a demonic power that deprives women sexually with “[female] desire that slips out of male control, which contradicts the Victorian conviction that female sexuality is only a reflection of male sexuality, and cannot exist independently” (M. Janion, *Wampir: biografia symboliczna*, Gdańsk 2002, s. 208; trans. mine).

⁸ All references to and quotations from *Wuthering Heights* are taken from: E. Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, Oxford and New York 1989, p. 148. Further on in the text there is only the number of the page given in brackets.

Later on in the same conversation, he refers to his cruel treatment of Isabella and the others whom he despises as “a moral teething” (152). Isabella, having experienced what life with Heathcliff looks like for her, calls him “Monster”, mentions “his devilish nature” and suggests that “[h]e’s not a human being” (172) to refer a while later to “his sharp cannibal teeth” (176) and tell Hindley that Heathcliff’s “mouth watered to tear you with his teeth; because he’s only half a man – not so much” (180).

In an earlier scene, when Catherine realizes that Isabella has fallen in love with Heathcliff, she says half-teasingly: “I like her too well ... to let you absolutely seize and devour her up”, to which he replies that *he* likes her “too ill to attempt it ...except in a ghoulish fashion. You’d hear of odd things if I lived alone with that mawkish, waxen face ... She’s her brother’s heir, is she not?” (106)⁹. On the one hand we should notice the sexual overtones of this exchange, which corresponds precisely with archetypal – especially in eroticised accounts – representations of vampires as males who possess a demonic power of seduction which they use to turn women into their sexual prey. On the other hand, though, Heathcliff directly denies having any sexual appetite for Isabella by referring to her as being an heiress of the Lintons’ fortune which, in the context of his later vow that he will drink Edgar’s blood, suggests that it is money that stands for the liquid of life.

In light of what has been said above, it is not surprising at all that superstitious Nelly, bewildered by Heathcliff’s behaviour in the period preceding his death, muses if he is “a ghoul, or a vampire” (330). Nelly mentions this in connection with her reading about “such hideous, incarnate demons” (330), which parallels Heathcliff’s sober observation that Isabella left her home “under a delusion ... picturing in me a hero of a romance” (150). Both extracts pertain to Heathcliff’s similarity to the Byronic hero, with whom he shares uncontrollable emotionality, brooding nature, profound loneliness, pleasure derived from trespassing, (self)-destructiveness and mysteriousness. We know virtually nothing of his lineage – he is a foundling or a changeling, but of what origin? Even Nelly who has known him for so many years shortly before his death wears herself with “imagining some fit parentage for him” (330). In the case of Byron’s heroes we do not have precise information in this matter either, but through allusions we find out that they are of aristocratic origin¹⁰.

⁹ About the connections between vampires, ghouls and werewolves consult: M. Janion, *Wampir...*, op. cit., s. 17-27.

¹⁰ About the motif of the vampire and Byron see: *ibidem*, s. 169-183.

Is Heathcliff, being an emanation of the Byronic hero, an aristocratic child? In the context of vampire connotations the answer might be positive, since, as Bartsch, DiPalma and Sells state it, in the vampire's long history "the issue of class is apparent in the aristocratic references to titles such as Count Dracula"¹¹. But it might equally be negative, especially in Haraway's unorthodox or even subversive re-interpretation of the vampire figure. She emphasizes the fact that the vampire has always addressed the European unconscious fear of impurity and infection with the blood of the Other – Haraway provides a list that apparently should not be taken as exhaustive: the Jew, the diseased prostitute, the gender pervert, the alien, the traveller, the immigrant, the dislocated one etc., so we could add a gypsy foundling to it. And although she is also aware of the darker aspect of her figure¹², Haraway intentionally concentrates on the promises carried on by her new monstrous figure, especially in terms of problematising all sorts of bonding by blood rather than choice. In this way she steers the reader towards solidarity with the outlaws.

Catherine is another vampire figure in the novel, although in her case textual tropes are not that direct. Yet, the fact that she becomes united with Heathcliff after their death and that they can be seen on the moors, makes their ontological status uncertain: they are dead, but somehow not completely. This corresponds with two important statements made by Maria Janion: first, that in literature since Romanticism a connection between vampirism, the theme of "love ... beyond the grave and dark forces of nature or sexuality"¹³ has often been explored; and second – as she quotes from Jean Delumeau – that vampires are not immortal, but *amortal*, which means that in their case life is continued after death, but not to eternity, since death can be recognized here as something progressive rather than immediate¹⁴. In *WUTHERING HEIGHTS* Heathcliff's and Catherine's mutual sexual magnetism, which could not be realized under strict social norms, is taken beyond the grave where such norms cease to oppress. It has to be pointed out, too, that their love is fulfilled in nature (as a result of Heathcliff's arrangements their bodies decompose together; and after 'death' they can be seen on the moors).

When Catherine states that Heathcliff is "more myself than I am" (80),

¹¹ I. Bartsch, C. DiPalma, and L. Sells, *Witnessing the Postmodern Jeremiad...*, op. cit., p. 146.

¹² D. J. Haraway, *Modest_Witness...*, op. cit., p. 215.

¹³ M. Janion, *Wampir...*, op. cit., s. 16.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, s. 32.

she makes reference to the fact that Heathcliff stands for the part of her nature that she is bound to repress or even kill by marrying Edgar. Sandra Gilbert and Susan M. Gubar, using classic Freudian terms, associate this part (and Heathcliff) with Catherine's "childish and desirous id"¹⁵ repressed by the dictatorial norms of the superego as represented by Edgar and the values of Thrushcross Grange in general. This does not conflict with perceiving both the novel's protagonists as vampire figures, a metaphor which easily contains the aspect of spontaneous sexuality repressed by strict social regulations. What is interesting, Catherine makes her statement (together with revealing her true love for Heathcliff) while she describes her dream about going to heaven to a reluctant Nelly:

[H]eaven did not seem to be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out, into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights; where I woke sobbing for joy. (80)

Going to heaven, like going to live in the Grange, entails Catherine's death – both in a figurative and literal sense. In this light the dream is as much a warning as a promise: Catherine has to die crushed by the cultural norms that have turned her into a lady and as a result of the complications of childbirth, but, eventually, she will "come back to earth", she will become undead. Heathcliff's disappearance after being rejected by Catherine and his return two years later can be perceived as its parallel.

The promise of the dream corresponds with the mirror scene in which Catherine, shortly before her death, does not recognize her own reflection. As Gilbert and Gubar argue, this is because she has become alienated from her true self and the mirror confronts her with the woman she has been turned into living in the Grange¹⁶. Agreeing completely with this interpretation, I would only like to point out that a mirror scene is a standard motif in vampire stories. In spite of all her (false?) attempts at transforming herself into a lady (i.e. to become integrated with the patriarchal culture through marriage and motherhood), Catherine remains an odd-one-out who cannot abide by the predominant rules and norms, she remains the Other who, moreover, does not reflect in the mirror. Taken together, these two extracts legitimise reading Catherine, similarly to Heathcliff, as a vampire figure.

¹⁵ S. M. Gilbert and S. Gubar, *Looking Oppositely: Emily Brontë's Bible of Hell*, [in:] *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven and London 1979, p. 281.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 283.

On one level at least *WUTHERING HEIGHTS* treats with blood ties and their consequence, whose lowest common denominator is an attitude to the Other – a foundling of unclear origin, a woman in the patriarchal world, or nature suppressed by culture¹⁷. Haraway openly states her intentions behind implementing the metaphor of the vampire to question and deconstruct ‘ties through blood’ when she says:

I am sick to death of bonding through kinship and “the family”, and I long for models of solidarity and human unity and difference rooted in friendship, work, partially shared purposes, intractable collective pain, inescapable mortality, and persistent hope. It is time to theorize an “unfamiliar” unconscious, a different primal scene, where everything does not stem from the dramas of identity and reproduction. ... I believe that there will be no racial or sexual peace, no livable nature, until we learn to produce humanity through something more and less than kinship. I think I am on the side of the vampires, or at least some of them¹⁸.

Since *WUTHERING HEIGHTS* was published in 1847, it has confronted readers with negative and unpleasant aspects of our ‘familiar’ unconscious that tells us that birds of a feather flock together. Emily Brontë’s novel spreads its Dark Gift by arguing, through the story of Catherine and Heathcliff, that there are alternatives to historically determined, culturally produced and socially induced patterns of human bonding. Provided we let vampires spread their wings.

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¹⁷ See: M. Homans, *The Name of the Mother in Wuthering Heights*, [in:] E. Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. by L. H. Peterson, Boston 1992, p. 341-358.

¹⁸ D. J. Haraway, *Modest_Witness...*, op. cit., p. 265.