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## TRANSCENDING THE CELLULOID:

### *Emily Brontë's 'Wuthering Heights' in Cinematic Interpretations*

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**Abstract:** This research article delves into Emily Brontë's only masterpiece, *Wuthering Heights*, and its famous adaptation; William Wyler's black and white version from 1939. By diligently comparing the characters, plot, narrative structure, dialogue, and setting of the original novel with the select version on celluloid, this study seeks to uncover intriguing insights into how a filmmaker has interpreted and reimagined the tumultuous relationship and the same haunting love story of Heathcliff and Catherine in his own ways. The comprehensive analysis of the novel and its adaptation sheds light on how a novel is interpreted on celluloid. Ultimately, this exploration of the adaptation enriches our understanding of *Wuthering Heights'* enduring literary and cultural significance in the realm of film adaptation. Through the lens of the 1939 version, we come to appreciate the enduring power of Emily Brontë's original narrative and how it continues to resonate with audiences throughout the ages.

**Index Terms – adaptation, celluloid, film, dialogue, plot, character.**

#### I. INTRODUCTION

“In the twentieth century, there are two culturally dominant ways of experiencing fiction available to us; the visual forms of film and the prose forms of novel” (Montgomery, et al. 191). From the beginning of theatres, films, and television, literature has been an important influential factor. Many famous masterpieces of literature have been adapted to the screen. However, each of them uses a different way of narrating the same story differently. Many determinants influence the production of any film based on any literary text. Notwithstanding the extensive study that has been done on literary adaptations in comparison to their original texts, there is still room to examine this topic further by concentrating on the areas that the researchers only dealt with briefly.

This paper will be focused on comparing and contrasting the 1939 film adaptation of the well-celebrated novel *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë with the original text by concentrating on the major characters, themes, narrative structure, plot, setting, and dialogues.

Linda Hutcheon says that adaptation is not, under any circumstances, a copy. It combines the comfort of ritual and familiarity with the joy of surprise and novelty; repetition without replication. It involves persistence and variety, as well as memory and change. (A Theory of Adaptation, 173). A movie adaptation is a film that is based on a previously written work, such as a novel, play, drama, or short story. Movie adaptations are created by filmmakers who want to bring the story of the original work to celluloid. Some movie adaptations are very faithful to the original work, while others are loose adaptations as they take notable liberties with the source material. This process of adaptation involves translating the written story into a visual and auditory medium in such a way that it becomes more suitable for film. The process can be arduous as it demands some refinement in the story, characters, dialogues, and themes of the novel to bring it on celluloid which is understood and appreciated by a wider audience. The filmmaker has to make decisions about what elements of the story he should include or exclude, and how he should portray the characters and events of the story in a compelling and meaningful way to the audience.

#### II. EMILY BRONTË ON CELLULOID

Emily Brontë's only novel, *Wuthering Heights* is globally regarded as a masterpiece in the literary arena. The novel is rich in its evocative imagery, breathtaking depictions of nature, and strong human emotions. It was published in 1847 under the pseudonym Ellis Bell. It is to be noted here that the novel was not well-received by the readers when it was first published. But once it started gaining popularity, it became a literary classic. Since then, it has become a choice of many filmmakers and has been adapted into celluloid, stage productions, and television series. No doubt, *Wuthering Heights* is a masterpiece of English literature as it continues to be a well-loved and influential novel in the literary canon. The novel has had several film adaptations over the years. Specifically, I have chosen the black-and-white version from 1939, a well-received adaptation by William Wyler.

### III. WYLER' WUTHERING HEIGHTS ON CELLULOID

William Wyler's 1939 adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* was among the initial attempts to bring the novel to the big screen. This version, which is American, starred Merle Oberon who played the role of Catherine and Laurence Olivier of Heathcliff. The main focus of the film is on Heathcliff's shortcomings and Catherine's struggle to adapt to high society, with the Moors playing a vital role in shaping their characters. The characters frequently gather at Penistone Crag for games, from their childhood through to adulthood. The movie excludes the second-generation storyline and ends with the ghostly reunion of Catherine and Heathcliff at Penistone Crag. (Glen, 2002, pp. 233-234)

The film was critically and commercially a big success. It was honoured to be nominated for eight Academy Awards, where it bagged the prize for Best Cinematography and received nods for Best Actor and Best Picture. The movie earned the Best Film prize from the New York Film Critics in 1939. Just 16 of the original text's 34 chapters are depicted in this movie. This version fully eliminates the second generation of characters. It lasts 1 hour and 44 minutes.

When this film was produced, the colour film had already been developed and was readily available, but Wyler opted for black and white to create a more Gothic and atmospheric effect as the novel has an element of gothic. The dark and shadowy visuals created by the monochrome film perfectly suited the film's melancholic and dramatic themes.

This paper aims to first examine and then contrast the primary characters in the novel with their portrayal in the adaptation. The paper will also focus on identifying major changes in the selected adaptation in terms of setting, plot, narrative structure, gothic elements, and dialogues. It will also try to assess whether the cast of the adaptation has been successful in depicting the personalities of Catherine and Heathcliff, as well as to highlight any notable discrepancy in the characterization of other key figures.

### IV. CHARACTERS OF THE FILM VS THE NOVEL

While doing a comparative analysis of the characters in the film to their counterparts in the novel, there were found many differences; be it in terms of physical appearance or emotional strength, or their level of maturity. The first visible difference is that the film portrays Catherine and Heathcliff as being more physically appealing than their counterparts in the novel. The novel depicts Catherine and Heathcliff as being 'plain and unconventional in their appearance', while in the film, these major characters are played by attractive actors like Merle Oberon and Laurence Olivier. Heathcliff is described as "a dark-skinned gypsy in aspect, in dress and manners a gentleman" by Emily in the novel, while he is portrayed as a man with striking features by casting Laurence Olivier as Heathcliff. Catherine and Heathcliff are complex and multifaceted characters whose tumultuous relationship lies in the center of the story of the novel as well as in the film. They possess intense romantic feelings for each other which are proved to be destructive too. The film captures the complexity of the novel's characters by highlighting the emotional depth. The film is successful in conveying the major themes of love, jealousy, revenge, and the destructive power of strong emotions that are central to the novel.

The film also differs in portraying the characters as being more emotionally expressive than their counterparts in the novel. The film shows Heathcliff way more open and expressive, allowing the audience to connect with his emotional journey whereas, in the novel, he often keeps his emotions hidden or suppressed. Similarly, Catherine shows her feelings of intense love and jealousy very openly in the film, whereas, in the novel, her inner turmoil is depicted through her diary entries. This applies to the portrayal of other characters too as they are shown to be more open and expressive in the film, but the novel portrays them to be emotionally less expressive.

### V. THE PLOT OF THE FILM VS THE NOVEL

The plot of Wyler's adaptation remains close to the plot of the original novel, except for the story of the second generation which is omitted by Wyler. The plot revolves around the novel's fundamental themes and elements, including Heathcliff's revenge on Edgar, Hindley's brutal abuse of Heathcliff, and the class struggle between the characters.

a) **The framing device:** The film begins with the character of Mr. Lockwood arriving at Wuthering Heights and discovering the story of Heathcliff and Catherine through the housekeeper, Ellen Dean, who narrates the story in flashback. This framing device is not present in the novel.

"I have just returned from a visit to my landlord – the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with."

This opening line, spoken by Mr. Lockwood in the film sets the tone for the rest of the film. Lockwood is a stranger to the area, and his arrival at Wuthering Heights is the beginning of his journey into the dark and brooding world of the Earnshaws and the Lintons.

b) **Changes in the timeline:** The film compresses the timeline of the story, condensing the events of several years into a shorter period to streamline the story and make it more cinematic. For example, the courtship of Catherine and Edgar Linton is shown to happen relatively quickly, and without the extended separation that occurs in the novel. Catherine's illness and eventual death are shown to happen in a shorter period in the film than in the novel. In the film, Catherine dies shortly after giving birth to her daughter Cathy, whereas in the novel, there is a significant gap of several years between these events.

c) **Changes to the ending:** The director has made a significant change in the ending of this adaptation. This adaptation ends differently from the novel. The film shows that Heathcliff becomes a completely broken man after the death of his beloved Catherine. He is haunted by visions of Catherine's ghost. In the end, Heathcliff also dies and his ghost is shown reunited with Catherine's ghost and then they walk away into the misty moors. This ending is quite different from the novel, where it ends with Heathcliff's death. There is a sense of closure for the other characters after Heathcliff's death. Brontë gives no indication of the reunion of Heathcliff and Catherine after death. The aim of the filmmaker here in making a change in the ending seems to emphasize more on the Gothic elements of the story to arouse the interest of the viewers by adding a sense of tragedy and supernatural mystery in the end.

## VI. Dialogues in the film vs in the novel

Since the adaptation is not a copy of the text, this film has also made some changes to the original dialogues of the novel which is unobjectionably allowed. It is the liberty of the filmmaker. He has made these changes to streamline the story and make it more appealing to a wider audience. Some of the dialogues are altered to suit the particularities of film as a medium.

a) **Condensed and simplified dialogues:** Some of the more complex passages of dialogue from the novel have been condensed and simplified. The reason is that intellectual readers can understand those complex passages but a common audience or viewer might not comprehend them or get the feel of the emotion delivered by the character through a complex dialogue. Since films are meant to be watched by a wider audience, including all types of people, the language used should be easy for all. For instance, there is a scene in the film where Heathcliff and Catherine are arguing about their love for each other, the dialogue delivered there is more simple, straightforward than the dialogue in the novel. This change makes the scene easier for the audience to connect with.

b) **Altered dialogues:** The film has altered some dialogues that are quite different from the novel. For example, when Catherine and Heathcliff first meet, Catherine tells him, "I'll be your friend" (Chapter 3). In the film, the word "friend" changes to "family". Catherine tells Heathcliff "I'll be your family". This change emphasizes the deep connection between the leading characters. Further, Heathcliff is described as "a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man" by Catherine (Chapter 9) in the novel, but in the film, Heathcliff is described as "a dark, splendid, young man" to accentuate his seductiveness and charm.

Another instance of altered dialogue is the last words spoken by Catherine before her death. In the novel, she dies uttering the words- "I am Heathcliff" (Chapter 16), whereas this line is changed to "Heathcliff, I love you" in the film, to emphasize the romantic and tragic end of their tumultuous relationship.

c) **Changes to the regional dialects:** The film adaptation has made some changes to the regional dialects used in the novel. The reason behind this is that the Yorkshire dialect spoken by characters in the novel can be a bit difficult for some readers to understand. The film uses a more standardized English dialect to make the dialogues easier and comprehensible for a wider audience to follow.

These changes to the dialogue make the story more accessible to a wider audience. It fills the scenes with more emotions according to the demand of the scene on screen. These changes are made according to the particularities of film as a medium. Despite all these changes, the film remains a faithful and powerful adaptation of Emily Brontë's universally admired classic masterpiece.

## VII. Conclusion

Wyler's version offers a different interpretation of Emily Brontë's novel. It draws attention to the romantic aspects of the story. Heathcliff and Catherine are depicted as tragic lovers separated by their class differences and social conventions. Heathcliff is portrayed as a more sympathetic and heroic figure, while Catherine is depicted as more passive and submissive than in the novel. The setting and the landscape of the moors with wild beauty and uncontrolled passion add to the romantic storyline of the film. The film features splendid sets, costumes, and music, reflecting the luxurious Hollywood studio system of the time. The characters are portrayed as glamorous and larger-than-life figures. The film makes several changes to the original novel, particularly in terms of the characterization of Heathcliff and Catherine. Although this adaptation remains faithful to the general plot and themes of the novel, it makes some changes to the characters with the intention of making them more suitable for the medium of film. This makes this adaptation a beloved and influential adaptation of Emily Brontë's classic work.

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