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Theoretical/Critical Essay Article

Identity Economics in Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights: An **Empathetic Inquiry into Psychoanalysis**

Ashfaque Akhter¹, Ahmed Tahsin Shams²

¹Department of English, Islamic Arabic University, Dhaka, Bangladesh ²Department of English. Notre Dame University. Dhaka, Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper aims to connect the interlocking ideas of how social signifiers psychologically develop utility function, theorized by George A. Akerlof and Rachel E. Kranton, in characters like Heathcliff, the protagonist of nineteenth-century English fiction Wuthering Heights by Emily Brontë. Heathcliff's motivation is a desire born out of circumstantial consequences, for example, to be with Catherine in life or wealthy like Linton's family. This paper pinpoints how only material wealth fails to give a sense of belongingness in Heathcliff's life, which he aimed at achieving in the second half of his transformative journey. In addition, this paper attempts to reason for the absence of identity in Heathcliff's decision-making process, which means a lack of empathy or belongingness in Heathcliff's ambition. This research leads to a hypothesis that if Heathcliff had been brought up in an empathetic environment, the readers would not have perceived such degradation of mental health as abusive actions that he performs. Through a qualitative inductive method, this paper analyzes the aspect of identity economics that focuses on empathy. Thus, this paper gives insight into how material wealth without empathy only amplifies, particularly Heathcliff's violent nature, thereby leading the protagonist to an end where peace is a hallucination like Catherine's 'ghost.' Keywords: Identity economics, utility function, social signifiers, empathy, mental health, psychoanalysis

Introduction

In the novel, Wuthering Heights by Emily Brontë, Mr. Earnshaw adopts Heathcliff, whose identity is unknown to the readers, causing the initial social conflict with other hierarchical identities like Hindley's and Edgar Linton's. The 'symbolic' and the 'imaginary' stages form Heathcliff's transformations and, thereby, his identity shifts. His awareness of the socio-cultural signifiers contributes to this journey. The 'symbolic

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stage' made him believe that he is deprived of the 'husband' identity because of his socioeconomic 'class.' Contrary to the earlier 'imaginary' perception of himself, 'the fantasies' Heathcliff's mind processed regarding his relationship with Catherine, he discovers, was only his 'imagination' when he eavesdrops on Catherine and Nelly's conversation. Catherine considers Edgar Linton her husband---in Heathcliff's 'the real' stage--extremely conflicts with his long-learned signifiers.

Human behavior is coded with social norms, whether framed consciously or subconsciously. These codes also establish certain power relations. For instance, Nelly thinks she belongs to Heathcliff's social status as Heathcliff is not a blood-heir of the Earnshaw family. On the other hand, Hindley cannot develop a brotherly relationship with Heathcliff due to those hierarchical norms. Similarly, Catherine cannot think of marrying Heathcliff as he is "brought down low" (Brontë 170) by society. Above all, characters choose identity by following specific codes and norms. Heathcliff is not an exception. He decided what he observed.

George A. Akerlof and Rachel E. Kranton assert that choice and limitations tie up together in the super-structures of society (18). In Heathcliff's case, the social categories were not "race...ethnicity" (16), rather not having a family background stood as a bar for him to "adopt a new identity" (23). Heathcliff had three models in front of him throughout the novel, especially in his youth. Firstly, Catherine stands there as a 'love' or 'friend' model who has chosen Edgar over Heathcliff. Heathcliff learns 'betrayal' from this model as signifiers and signified were poles apart. Secondly, Hindley becomes his 'behavior' model from whom he knows how to behave with the family members. Finally, Edgar Linton, though not a family member in the beginning but a neighbor only, works as the 'ambition' model that teaches Heathcliff subconsciously what to become in life to maintain the first model: love or friendship.

Akerlof and Kranton claim that economists build models and categories like the following: Firstly, according to economists, social classes mean where "workers identify themselves either as outsiders or as members of a workgroup" (52). Before the interval segment in Heathcliff's life, Mr. Earnshaw adopted Heathcliff as his son, and Catherine became her bosom playmate. Contrarily, when they were growing up, Heathcliff became an outsider as Hindley wished. A reference to empathy was missing in Thrushcross Grange. On the other hand, theorists assert that 'identity economics' removes "a complex gap in the social sciences" and the theorists also believe that "people have an idea of what they work hard for and how they learn, spend and save, and what is forbidden and what is fundamental" (52). So, identity from the Economy is inseparable as one not only influences the other but also creates targets in life to reach and become.

However, material wealth without contributing to an empathetic identity creates a chaotic and brutal situation where Heathcliff victimizes others---Isabella and Hareton---just the way he was victimized in his childhood. This paper analyzes Heathcliff's childhood where empathy roles were absent that developed a character with passive aggression. Therefore, this thesis hypothesizes that material ambition and trauma due to materialistic otherization in childhood mirrored Heathcliff's identity crisis and could have been resolved if he had an empathetic upbringing environment. The pressure Heathcliff had of not having a social identity also impacted his rough and brute attitude towards relationships. Identity is indeed complex, but social norms define the fundamental attitudes. In the case of Heathcliff, empathy was absent in his economic model; therefore, his mental health turned him into a violent one even though he became rich in the end. Along with his financial growth, if social identity could have been cultivated, hypothetically, it can be said that according to medical health experts, Heathcliff would not show those 'abusive' traits that are evident in him.

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Literature Review

American theorists George Akerlof and Rachel Kranton revolutionized the traditional economic field by incorporating "human agency" into a model of economics. They affirmed in a paper entitled "Economics and Identity" that the presence of "psychology and sociology" (133) of identity in the economic models of behavior gives an entirely new insight. Earlier, the cultural differences and cognitive emotions were not bridged because only "utility maximization" (22) for profit-making was considered the smartest decision in terms of money. But the 'cataclysmic crisis' in the pro-capitalistic era, after the Second World War changed the whole scenario where 'class' is defined not only in terms of 'economy' but also as a cultural phenomenon. Most of the economic decision-making process now derives from social identity or belongingness. The paper was turned into a book in 2010 named *Identity Economics: How Our Identities Shape Our Work, Wages and Well-Being* by George Akerlof and Rachel Kranton, where they address how human identity in society has a more substantial influence on their economic decisions without which Heathcliff might aim 'irrational' choices, for instance, to be the owner of Wuthering Heights but to belong nowhere.

In this regard, George Akerlof and Rachel Kranton referred to Robbers Cave Experiment (29), which explains how social conflicts can be diminished when society members work cohesively for "common goals." The study establishes that isolation or alienation cannot reduce conflicts among societal groups. People's "sense of self" influences behavior when interacting in a group. Thus, the Symbolic order, based on Lacan's 'mirror-stage', makes Catherine choose Edgar as her husband. The Lacanian Real stage shows Heathcliff that his perception regarding Catherine was mere 'imaginary.' Being cast out from a social group, Heathcliff evolves into someone villainous in the end. Theoretically, if Heathcliff belonged to any group, social cohesion between groups could be formed, which did not happen with him.

Many researchers have shown the Lacanian reading of *Wuthering Heights*, where the three stages: The Symbolic, The Imaginary, and the Real, are elaborately discussed regarding Heathcliff's upbringing. However, the gap remains: the identity of Heathcliff is a transformative journey like the Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis* by Kafka, which this paper discusses—empathy could have saved Heathcliff from becoming the 'vermin' he turned into in the obsession of Catherine.

Most of the earlier studies and research talked about a psychoanalytical reading of *Wuthering Heights*. For instance, Seda Arikan's "From the Imaginary to the Real: A Lacanian reading of *Wuthering Heights*", published in 2016, or Ala Abdulkareem in his thesis "Reading of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*: An Analysis of Some Defense Mechanisms of Some Characters," published by the Department of English, Dalarna University in 2011 share the similar approaches by discussing denial in Catherine and Isabella and repression in many characters in the novel. Nevertheless, no research has been found on how Identity Economics is implied in literary texts, particularly in Heathcliff's social life, the protagonist in the novel.

Another article, "Identity Crisis and Doppelganger in Gothic Fiction: An exemplary psychoanalytic interpretation of Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*," published in 2011 by Sitem Kolburan, discusses how a character's ego is completely isolated from the self concerning Lacan's Mirror Stage and also suffers from 'identity diffusion in the context of Gothic Fiction. However, this research was a literary approach rather than an interdisciplinary one.

On the contrary, adding Akerlof and Rachel Kranton with the reading of *Wuthering Heights* and the role of empathy and mental health makes this research distinctive compared to the ones mentioned above. Thus, this paper also stands as an

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example of how incorporating other disciplines like Economics, Mental Health, and Literature can keep pace with one another in the field of knowledge.

Methodology

Through the qualitative inductive method, this paper diagnoses the protagonist of *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë Heathcliff, who can be argued to be the antagonist too, based on his actions. However, the research goal is to evaluate his activities in the text from the theory of economics named *Identity Economics: How Our Identities Shape Our Work, Wages and Well-Being* by George Akerlof and Rachel Kranton. The limitation of this study remains in its hypothesis of this fiction text where the upbringing environment of Heathcliff is questioned: what if it could have been full of empathy rather than extreme examples of hierarchy and marginalization by all other characters whom he found as his only family members? Thereby, this study aims at an empathetic inquiry rather than providing mere psychoanalysis of Heathcliff. The paper aims at a multidisciplinary audience to establish a bridge among economics, psychology, and literature.

As discussed in the literature review, earlier approaches to similar kind of literary texts only aimed at critical analysis of 'what is perceived' in the text. Nevertheless, this paper determines the reasonings of 'what is absent' yet could hugely impact formation of human traits. This paper evaluates Heathcliff's phases in Thruscross Grunge and in the Heights. Thus, readers can re-investigate the character Heathcliff through this paper to realize the role of empathy in the character's actions and reactions.

Empathy and its Formations in Heathcliff

In *Identity Economics: How Our Identities Shape Our Work, Wages, and Well-Being*, George A. Akerlof and Rachel E. Kranton mention the four possible perceptions of individuals—what one is, what one was in the past, what one wishes to be, and finally what was once a part but not more a part (23-25). In the case of Heathcliff, this theory can be responded to in this manner: When the novel sets sail, Heathcliff is the landlord of Wuthering Heights, whereas he was an orphan-adopted kid treated worse than Nelly. Catherine and Linton's marriage provoked him to be what he is today---to own what stood as a bar to be with Catherine--an identity in terms of material wealth. A loving 'gentle' figure that was once part of himself seems to have faded away with the death of Mr. Earnshaw. His present description contrasts with his early life—from "dark-skinned gipsy" to "gentleman" (62).

Heathcliff is seen to be devoid of empathy because his upbringing had no such reference to learning empathy. Empathy is "an emotion triggered in people behaving in a virtuous, pure or superhuman way" (Haidt et al.). In addition, Martin Hoffman identified "five ways in which empathy is aroused in humans: mimicry, classical conditioning, direct association, mediated association, role-taking." (36-37) Thereby, it can be analyzed that Heathcliff could not recognize others' feelings because no one recognized his feelings. According to the theory, "mimicry communicates awareness, involvement, connection, and understanding of another's emotional state and even solidarity between the observer and the other." Heathcliff mimicked what he learned from Hindley in the latter phase of the novel after his return with Hareton: "Heathcliff's violent nature was not prepared to endure the appearance of impertinence from one whom he seemed to hate, even then, as a rival" (137). In his childhood, the dashing of "hot apple sauce" against Edgar, for which Mr. Earnshaw punished him by being confined in his chamber, foreshadows the present time where Isabella weeps again!

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On the other hand, classical conditioning is observed in Heathcliff, which means following the tradition, though that is one kind of mimicking. For example, Heathcliff learned from Catherine, Edgar, and Hindley what to aim for in life and how to behave. In most of his childhood scenes, readers find Hindley to call words addressed to Heathcliff like "vagabond" (86), "coxcomb" (137), and what not! Direct association means having a similar kind of experience to others. Heathcliff realized this empathy phase when the next generation, Linton Heathcliff and Cathy Linton, tied the knot. What Heathcliff could never achieve, the 'imaginary' became literally 'Real' with Heathcliff's son and Catherine's daughter.

The mediated association is perceived in the narrator only--Nelly--as she worked as the verbal ground for Heathcliff and Catherine. However, the confrontation scenes between Heathcliff and Catherine were empathetic too. "The final mode of empathy arousal" that Hoffman discussed is "role-taking" (52-53). This is the act of cognitively putting oneself in another's place and imagining how others might feel.

Role-taking is developmentally advanced, and "how an observer practices roletaking is reflective of that individual's personal development" (Hoffman 52-53). This phase took a reverse gear in Heathcliff's life, and he wanted to put Hindley and his son Hareton in such a traumatic situation that child Heathcliff had gone through. As they sow, so they reap! George A. Akerlof and Rachel E. Kranton theorized that "nonpecuniary tastes and preferences" (10), like aims in life, ambitions for family, and wealth–are utility functions that form human identities that contribute a lot to their choices and economic decisions. Indeed, this theory of identity economics puts forward the "limits placed by society" (23) which play a vital role in mental health.

While analyzing how identity is reasoned can be exposed in four situational references: firstly, maladaptive or self-destructive behavior, which is visible in Heathcliff. For example, Heathcliff used a similar kind of language against Edgar Linton, instead can be said–verbal abuse–that he learned from Hindley when he was a kid: "perishing monkey," "contemptible treachery," and "imbecile conceit" (444).

Secondly, responsive behavior is evoked by someone's action. Notably, when Heathcliff eavesdropped on Catherine where she explicitly discriminated against Heathcliff based on material aspects– "degrade me to marry Heathcliff" (170). Thus, Heathcliff learned how love is evaluated and constructed even though the difference between Edgar and Heathcliff was compared with "moonbeam and lightening" or "frost and fire" (444).

Thirdly, identity leads to preferences that can be transformative. When Heathcliff returned intending to own Wuthering Heights, he wanted to target the "keen feelings" (198) of the teen Isabella. As a brother, he blamed "on Heathcliff's deliberate designing" (199), but as ill luck would have it, that's how Heathcliff got trained.

Many times, incentives dominate the choices individuals make. Thereby, fourthly "choice of identity may be the most important "economic" decision people make" (199). Here, in Heathcliff's journey, the incentive was Catherine.

The Role of 'Identity Economics' in Heathcliff's Journey

Social norms are born out of community belongingness. Within a community, when interacting, identities newly emerge. It is evident in Heathcliff's situation that the new brutal Heathcliff or the old Heathcliff, all these new identities are born out of social contexts. Critically analyzing from a socio-anthropological perspective, the tri-knot among norms, people's view of self (ego), and the social context seem to be conditioned by power relations or super-structures that create a binary of punishing and rewarding. Akerlof and Kranton write about several experiments where "group divisions matter

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even when there are monetary stakes" (29). Thus, society has the concept of punishing out-group members and rewarding in-group members. A similar action is perceived when Hindley changes his attitude towards Heathcliff after the death of Mr. Earnshaw and treats him worse than a servant. In addition, such "in-group preference" (29) is observed in the novel when Heathcliff unreasonably tortures Isabella and Hareton, whereas they were nowhere at all when Heathcliff was victimized. Starting from the root, when Heathcliff was picked up on the Liverpool streets by Mr. Earnshaw, he became a part of another world where symbolic meanings and their connotations were different than his earlier. During his upbringing, the harsh behavior of Hindley, a false consciousness of love that turns into betrayal, forms his new self. However, according to Akerlof and Kranton, people feel guilty for their own decisions. The identity economics theory discusses how from time to time, human perspective shifts and a different self takes form, and so "the new self could regret the decisions made by the old self."

The ambition to have revenge in Heathcliff's head is born from a series of reactions. All those traumatizing events haunt him and turn into vengeance. The plot significantly shifts when Heathcliff was shaken by his infatuation with Catherine Edgar in their conversation with Nelly.

Conclusion

With the death of old Earnshaw, it seems that empathy died too in the house. Insecure Hindley's tyranny replaced equity. Catherine's symbolic sense gives birth to the stereotypical notion of 'marriage' and 'husband' roles. Heathcliff behaved like a vengeful sadist to deal with this castration and threats. The social standards Catherine presumed boosted the rivalry among Hindley, Heathcliff, and Edgar. Whether Heathcliff is a hero or a villain–this argument is circumstantial. Around 17 years, Heathcliff holds on to his revenge, and his masochistic identity is revealed in his behavior with Isabella. Heathcliff does not consciously choose evil; rather, he becomes evil being devoid of empathy during his transformative journey and certainly in childhood as a teenager. His volcanic features were a natural outburst as he never perceived empathy around.

As identities are formed based on non-monitory roles and functions, Heathcliff was deprived of all of those. The paper diagnoses Heathcliff's journey with a claim adding in the context of the novel that the absence of empathy in childhood upbringing might lead to passive aggressive consequences as it is perceived in the life of Heathcliff. With reference to the Lacanian symbolic and imaginary stage, the reality was constructed by Heathcliff in such a manner that had all those brutal features in his ambition. All the levels of empathetic formations are absent in Heathcliff's journey to becoming wealthy, thereby, creating his new identity—that is not so 'heroic'—even though he successfully achieved his material goals.

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