

Isabella Linton: An Evolutionary Character

Isabella Linton, in the novel *Wuthering Heights*, is a complicated and dynamic character. To be sure, she is not static. Indeed, as the novel develops so too does Isabella's character. Her character develops in stages as she is confronted by new situations and new challenges. She is young and foolish, she makes mistakes, she becomes incredibly desperate, and then, to some extent, she redeems herself before she dies. This essay will examine Isabella's strong character traits and her weak character traits as they are expressed explicitly in the text, and the influence that her strengths and weaknesses have on the other characters in the novel.

As an initial matter, Isabella is presented in a comparatively weak light. Bronte tells us, through Elly, that Isabella is

a charming lady of eighteen; infantile in manners, though possessed of keen wit, keen feelings, and a keen temper, too, if irritated (*Wuthering Heights*).

Her initial character weaknesses are naivety and childishness. These are manifest, later on, in her impetuous decision to marry. Of course, given her relatively tender age, eighteen at the time, these character traits are not as weak as they would be in an adult with more experience. Her experience, it must also be noted, does not extend much, if at all, beyond Thrushcross Grange. It must also be conceded that Ellen presents some positive attributes. Isabella, for instance, is naïve and a bit foolish, but she is not stupid. Quite the contrary, she has a clever wit and deep feelings. In short, Isabella is neither weak nor strong in the very beginning; however, her weaker traits, such as an infantile-like impetuosity, are dominant. These traits foreshadow a mistake in judgment. Indeed, with her marriage to Heathcliff, this is precisely what happens.

Later, when Isabella becomes infatuated with Heathcliff, her foolishness becomes her dominant character trait to the exclusion of all other traits. Catherine teases and warns her about wanting to be with Heathcliff. Isabella responds by stating that, "I won't be always sent off!", and that "You are a dog in the manger, Cathy, and desire no one to be loved but yourself!" (Wuthering Heights). The facts are irrelevant for Isabella. She is jealous and desirous. Here, Isabella's impetuous character speeds her demise and exacerbates her powerlessness. She concludes one particular rant by stating that,

All, all is against me: she has blighted my single consolation. But she uttered falsehoods, didn't she? Mr. Heathcliff is not a fiend: he has an honorable soul, and a true one, or how could he remember her?" (Wuthering Heights).

It is true that Catherine is not disinterested in Heathcliff; however, her advice and her warnings are sound and reliable. Isabella refuses to listen because she succumbs to the weaker of her character traits. Her power as a character is reaching a low point.

When she elopes with Heathcliff, her descent quickens. Isabella recognizes her foolish mistake within six weeks of her ill-fated marriage to Heathcliff. In a letter to Thrushcross Grange, she writes of her unhappiness. She admits that she has made a serious mistake. She is not allowed to sleep with her husband, she is not welcome in the house, and she is told by Heathcliff that she is not loved and that the entire marriage is a ruse. She is unhappy, but chooses to do nothing to change her situation. She is now estranged from her brother, Edgar, and a stranger in her marital home. Isabella begins to show signs of desperation. Significantly, this desperation is not channeled in positive ways. Instead, it leads to a sort of enlightened resignation. The foolishness of the child

disappears and the lack of willpower to change her situation becomes her dominant trait.

Her lack of will is a weakness and it condemns her to further abuse and unhappiness.

When Elly visits, for instance, Isabella is still captive to her weaknesses.

Heathcliff abuses his wife in front of Elly by declaring that,

She degenerates into a mere slut! She is tired of trying to please me uncommonly early. You'd hardly credit it, but the very morrow of our wedding she was weeping to go home. However, she'll suit this house so much the better for not being over nice, and I'll take care she does not disgrace me by rambling abroad (Wuthering Heights).

Isabella is still unable to leave Heathcliff. The best that she can do is to lose her temper and to express her suffering in words. She is, in effect, helpless. This helplessness is a character trait that defines her at this stage. She is no longer cute. She is no longer delicate and pampered. No, Isabella is an abused woman without the strength of character to leave her abusive situation. She is angry and bitter and resentful, but helpless.

Some might argue that Isabella hits rock-bottom when she is in the middle of the fight between Hindley and Heathcliff, but it seems to me the turning point is the death of Catherine and the fact that she is not invited to the funeral. In fact, "Isabella was not asked" (Wuthering Heights). This is rock-bottom because she is helpless and, in effect, abandoned by everyone. Catherine is dead, Heathcliff is indifferent, and Edgar has disowned her. I believe that Catherine's death is the turning point in Isabella's life. In particular, this is the moment after which Isabella begins to assert herself, and begins to demonstrate some of her stronger character traits that have been dormant.

When Isabella begins to torture Heathcliff about the true causes of Catherine's death, blaming Heathcliff, Isabella starts to regain her strength. The revenge is bitter

and cruel, and yet she does assert herself vigorously. She begins to abuse the oppressor. At this stage, she is hardly infantile or helpless. The tone of her language highlights her hostility, her growing strength, and her desire for revenge,

At the Grange, every one knows your sister would have been living now had it not been for Mr. Heathcliff. After all, it is preferable to be hated than loved by him. When I recollect how happy we were - how happy Catherine was before he came - I'm fit to curse the day (Wuthering Heights).

Isabella is no longer fearful. She is spiteful. This may appear to be a weakness in a sense, the loss of control, and yet it also marks a transition in her power as a character. She is regaining her confidence and her strength. Her willpower, an ultimate strength, is evolving. Heathcliff threatens to stomp on her, but she stands steadfast and heaps more scorn. The irony is that Heathcliff almost finally respects Isabella at this stage. Privately, he acknowledges the truth of some of her allegations though, outwardly, he remains abusive. The strings of her character have become dominant.

Soon thereafter, the strength of her character established, Isabella visits her brother, Edgar, and earns his forgiveness. The transition is nearly complete, the strength of her independence and willpower established, she then leaves Wuthering Heights of her own volition for London in order to give birth to her son. Isabella Linton dies a better and stronger character than she starts out.

The Influence of Isabella Linton

The second issue involves how Isabella Linton influences or affects the other characters in the story. Although she enters the story late, and exits it early, Isabella is hardly an insignificant character. She is a necessary character, one that is critically linked

throughout novel. Catherine's illness could not happen without her. Edgar's abandonment could not happen without her. Heathcliff's restraint, not killing Edgar, could not happen without her. This section of the essay will discuss how Isabella affects Edgar, Catherine, and Heathcliff.

Isabella influences her brother, Edgar, to withdraw. In the beginning, he is a confident young man without worries of any significance. He has good family relationships, he lives a pampered life, and he is an intelligent individual. Edgar loves Isabella and finds a wife to love and bear him a family. Edgar can deal with Heathcliff individually, but his sister's decision to elope leaves him feeling hurt and abandoned. He disowns his sister publicly, though he reserves a great deal of affection privately, and he is saddened. This abandonment is made more obvious when Catherine falls ill. Edgar is unable to communicate with his wife, who still loves Heathcliff, and unable to turn to his sister for comfort. A good man, in short, is left without family as a result of Isabella's actions. In the end, they make up, but the damage is done.

I also believe that Isabella has a negative influence on Catherine. Indeed, Catherine must accept responsibility for her decision to marry Edgar. Nonetheless, she is devastated by Isabella's decision to marry her true love. She tries to hide her feeling by being "haughty" and critical. Her sickness, in the end, is partially the result of her inner emotional turmoil. She is broken-hearted, and Isabella's defiance in marrying Heathcliff hurts her deeply. Isabella wounds Catherine, and she never recovers. This is ironic, considering the fact that Isabella dies with a sense of reconciliation whereas Catherine dies lonely.

Though this may not be the conventional argument, it seems to me that, in one particular way, Isabella has a moderating influence on Heathcliff. By this I mean that Heathcliff is able to divert his anger in a manner which prevents him from killing Edgar outright. Isabella, to her detriment, is his outlet. By marrying and abusing her he is able to exact his revenge on Catherine and Edgar. Catherine is hurt and Edgar is hurt. In the final analysis, she influences Heathcliff in a positive way for the benefit of her brother and her sister-in-law. Her influence is involuntary, but she functions as a buffer for Heathcliff's rage and jealousy.

Works Cited

Bronte, Emily. Wuthering Heights. The Literature Network. Retrieved August 1, 2006. <http://www.online-literature.com/bronte/wuthering/>