

**Glass-Fire Imagery Illuminates Soul Sharing  
in the Catherine-Heathcliff Relationship  
of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights***

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The premise that Catherine and Heathcliff share a single pre-existing soul will be examined through the juxtaposition of glass and fire imagery at major events in the novel. I'll explain how the dual imagery operates at each event and the ways in which many of the events can be organized into groups.

"Glass" appears throughout the book, typically in the form of windows or mirrors. Its most common purpose is undoubtedly that of something by which the world or oneself is observed. At the personal level the eyes assume much of this purpose, as is demonstrated by Nelly's description of Heathcliff's eyes as "the clouded windows of hell."<sup>1</sup> This implies that glass imagery exists as part of the window imagery, with eyes and windows functioning similarly.

"Fire," while commonly appearing in the traditional setting of the hearth, is also used by Brontë in verbal allusions to depict an aspect of a character or situation. But since in its literal form, fire has relevant connotations of this sort, the two forms will be treated with respect to this functional unity.

The nine events selected for discussion in this essay chronicle the Catherine-Heathcliff relationship while displaying a symmetry that arises from viewing the events organized into three chronologically ordered groups, each of which consists of three chronologically ordered events. The first event of each group involves Catherine and Edgar, the second concerns Catherine and Heathcliff, and the third pertains to death, whether it be Catherine's or Heathcliff's. Additionally, the three top-level groups, from first to last, focus on the "disintegration," "transition," and "resolution" of the Catherine-Heathcliff relationship. Here are the events and groups in outline.

#### Group 1 (Disintegration)

- |   |            |
|---|------------|
| 1. (Edgar-Isabella), (Catherine-Heathcliff) | p. 89      |
| 2. Heathcliff and Catherine, not at hearth  | pp. 96-8   |
| 3. Catherine realizes she is dying          | pp. 159-60 |

#### Group 2 (Transition)

- |  |           |
|--|-----------|
| 4. Introduction to Edgar wanting the window closed | pp. 161-5 |
| 5. Catherine and Heathcliff (last meeting)         | pp. 192-8 |
| 6. Heathcliff's tears in the ashes                 | p. 216    |

#### Group 3 (Resolution)

- |                              |        |
|------------------------------|--------|
| 7. Edgar's bitter reflection | p. 256 |
| 8. Heathcliff's purification | p. 359 |
| 9. Heathcliff's death        | p. 364 |

Note also that as events proceed from first to last, they transition from primarily the realm of the physical to primarily that of the spiritual, so although these two concepts typically coexist, their relative proportions change as the story progresses.

The first group of three events functions in at least two relevant ways. First, it establishes the relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff, and shows its dissolution. Second, it operates primarily on a physical level, and shows the consequences of such a limitation for Catherine and Heathcliff.

Our first glimpse of Catherine and Heathcliff, in my grouping, is at the window of the Linton home. In subsequently relating the story to Nelly, Heathcliff says that they had both stood “[at] the drawing room window,” and that “the light came from thence.”<sup>2</sup> Window imagery here serves to establish a barrier of sorts between Catherine-Heathcliff and the Lintons. The former can observe the latter’s way of life but are barred from joining it. Moreover, the mention of the light coming from the window evokes religious allusions of holiness and truth. Heathcliff himself says of the interior of the house, had he and Catherine been inside, “we should have thought ourselves in heaven!”<sup>3</sup> One indeed has this impression about the interior until Edgar and Isabella appear and thereby reveal that something has disrupted this ideal environment. “Edgar, (standing) on the hearth weeping silently” and Isabella “screaming at the farther end of the room”<sup>4</sup> collectively shatter what meaning the hearth has as a symbol of family solidarity.<sup>5</sup> Without delving into the details of their dispute, the major cause of it is greed. Although greed may have many implications, the salient one here is its signifying that this episode operates at a primarily human/physical level.

Although the claim that the relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff is in its essence spiritual could be established now in terms of factors other than glass-fire imagery, I would ask the reader to accept this assertion as a premise that will find support over the course of this essay through the use of glass and fire imagery.

The breakdown of the long-standing camaraderie between Catherine and Heathcliff can be traced to her being brought into the Linton home while Heathcliff is shunned. By the time Catherine returns to Wuthering Heights she has been significantly changed (e.g., has become more interested in worldly possessions) through the influence of the Lintons. One might even say that Catherine’s mind has been debased by her association with them. Heathcliff now realizes that he and Catherine can no longer meaningfully communicate with one another. Consider that when Nelly suggests that Heathcliff and Catherine “can sit together with the whole hearth to [themselves],”<sup>6</sup> Heathcliff exerts no effort to bring this about, signifying a new disunity between them. Shortly thereafter Heathcliff is found looking at himself in a mirror,<sup>7</sup> with the description of his eyes reflected in the mirror being especially notable as “black fiends” that “lurk glinting under [the brows] like devil’s spies.”<sup>8</sup> That this description is taken from the eyes’ appearance in the mirror rather than from simply a casual notice lends a special meaning to the incident. Considering that the reflection of a person in a mirror has been regarded in folklore as their soul, this description of Heathcliff’s eyes therefore is really a description of his nature or soul.

If one accepts that Heathcliff and Catherine are one in spirit, then this too is her nature. Thus this characterization is consistent with the notion that Catherine’s mental debasement is subjugating her spirit to the attainment of earthly vanities, one of which is greed. We’ve seen that greed produced suffering in the Linton home between Edgar and Isabella. Catherine’s “infection” with the same kind of mentality is the source of the suffering she and Heathcliff endure throughout the story. It can be shown (such as from material in Chapter 9) that even before Catherine becomes ill and ultimately dies, that she, as well as Heathcliff, suffers. But to avoid digressing from the main theme of this essay I’ll proceed directly to the time of Catherine’s death—the logical consequence of her actions as indicated by the imagery.

Circumstances surrounding Catherine’s two types of death are difficult to interpret and clearly articulate. The first sort of death, the one that follows chronologically from the first two events highlighted in this essay, is a “symbolic death” of her mental debasement, by which I mean that although she remains physically alive, there are signs and allusions that something in her has died.

The precise point of the transition in Catherine is difficult to discern, but already on p. 159 Catherine says in reference to Edgar, “does he know how I’m altered,” and upon looking at herself in a mirror, “is that Catherine Linton?”<sup>9</sup> Although the mention of her “alteration” might be taken simply in reference to her physical deterioration, it can also be interpreted as referring to her mental debasement. What is meant by Catherine only barely recognizing herself in a mirror? Perhaps the alteration is acting as a mental block that prevents her from clearly seeing her self-nature.

Shortly thereafter, Catherine suffers the “death” of her mental perversion. Nelly describes Catherine’s actions at this time by stating that she “tore the pillow with her teeth, then raising herself up all burning, desired that I would open the window.”<sup>10</sup>

The fire imagery evoked here operates on two levels. In one sense it represents the consumption and coming demise of Catherine’s body. But more profoundly, it signifies that Catherine’s spirit is transcending her body in agony, striving to escape the confines of Thrushcross Grange, and consequently become “one with nature,” so to speak. At that point, the part of Catherine Linton that Edgar was responsible for creating is dead.

Thus is revealed the result of Edgar’s influence on Catherine and, to some extent, on her relationship with Heathcliff. The second grouping (Events 4–6) will show more fully the suffering they each endure.

Event 4 is related to Event 1 (its counterpart in the first group) in which Catherine first met Edgar, the person whose influence gradually leads to a breakdown in her relationship with Heathcliff. In the present circumstance, Catherine rediscovers her soul, thereby restoring her initial spiritual state. Edgar’s second entry into the action at this point is significant for this very fact.

In fulfilment of the imagerial requirements of the event, in addition to giving more credence to the assertion that part of Catherine has died, consider the incidents directly after her alleged “mental death,” and before Edgar’s entrance. Catherine, as before, looks into a mirror and sees an image, but this time she is totally incapable of recognizing it as being herself. Nelly Dean notes that Catherine gazes at the mirror and says “Don’t you see that face?” Nelly then rises and “[covers] the mirror with a shawl.” Catherine insists “It’s behind there still” and then asks “Who is it?” Nelly replies “It [is] yourself, Mrs. Linton.” “‘Myself!’ [Catherine] gasped; ‘and the clock is striking twelve! It’s true then, that’s dreadful!’” Almost immediately, Catherine screams. “The shawl had dropped from the frame.”<sup>11</sup>

Catherine, in contrast to her inability in Event 3, can now clearly see her soul in the mirror, although she initially cannot comprehend that it is a spirit, or that the image bears any relation to her. The order in which Catherine becomes aware of certain things is significant. First, she realizes that she is looking at a spirit when she is still able to see the face even after the mirror is covered. (The custom of covering mirrors after a death supports the notion that part of Catherine has died.<sup>12</sup>) That Catherine cannot recognize the image as her spirit might be explained by her having denied her self-nature for so long that she has forgotten what it really is. When the notion is planted in her mind that what she sees is really her, she accepts it, but with horror. Her mention of the clock striking twelve at the time of her self acceptance supports the contention not only that she has died but also that this is her spirit.<sup>13</sup> Traditionally, midnight is the time when ghosts and other spirits wander about. Admittedly, the explanation of Catherine’s scream as the shawl falls from the mirror requires a loose interpretation of the mirror imagery.

A traditional belief holds that the soul of the person projected out of the person in the form of their reflection in a mirror may be carried off by the ghost of a departed person. The complicating feature of this situation is that the soul projected in the shape of Catherine’s reflection is the ghost of the mentally debased Catherine. This symbolic death has, so to speak, left open the way for her spirit to assume the primary role that it played before she met Edgar. Thus, the ghost of the deceased takes the soul of the reflected image and returns with it to the deceased, who remains physically alive. And so, Catherine’s scream results from the spirit regaining its initial status. Cath-

erine has now spiritually returned to where she was seven years earlier, although her physical condition has seriously deteriorated. In saying "Oh, I'm burning! I wish I were out of doors—I wish I were a girl again,"<sup>14</sup> she acknowledges her physical deterioration and at the same time expresses the elevated effects of her reaccepted spirit. The time has now arrived for the second entrance of Edgar.

In Event 1, Edgar was revealed both through his actions, and by the passive contact with different kinds of imagery. Here, Edgar is exposed by his active association with window imagery, in connection with Catherine whose spirit is apparently seeking a return to nature. Catherine says to Nelly "I'm sure I should be myself were I once among the heather on those hills ... Open the window again wide, fasten it open!"<sup>15</sup> Of course, by this time Catherine's body is beyond repair, but the suggestion of what her spirit desires is clear.

Then Edgar enters. His first statement: "Shut the window, Ellen!"<sup>16</sup> invokes the notion that he is suffocating Catherine's soul. But her knowledge of her impending physical death prevents her from falling under Edgar's spell a second time. The earthly vanities, the major attraction Edgar held for Catherine, are now meaningless to her. She says to him "I don't want you, Edgar; I'm past wanting you."<sup>17</sup> Thus Edgar can inflict no additional suffering to Catherine and Heathcliff, although that which Edgar previously induced will persist.

Event 4 (first event of Group 2) is a prelude to the brief meeting of Catherine and Heathcliff in Event 5. Spiritual and earthly existence are intertwined at the last meeting of Catherine and Heathcliff, although Catherine primarily operates on the spiritual level. Nelly's comments that "The flash of her eyes had been succeeded by a dreamy and melancholy softness: they no longer gave the impression of looking at objects around here; they appeared always to gaze beyond—and far beyond—you would have said out of this world,"<sup>18</sup> bears this out.

Heathcliff remains primarily on the physical level. Catherine's remark of seeing the world "dimly through tears"<sup>19</sup> while alive, points to this assertion. At the time of her statement, Heathcliff is seen at the "fire-place, where he [stands] silent, with his back towards"<sup>20</sup> Nelly and Catherine. Heathcliff has been weeping. And by coming to the fireplace he is seeking purification,<sup>21</sup> which will relieve his mortal suffering (denoted by tears) and thus lead to unity with Catherine. The occurrence of the two levels simultaneously present indicates that Event 5 is not a reunion for Catherine and Heathcliff at all—it signifies only a brief encounter before their being subjected to even greater separation.

Until this point, the reader has been asked to accept on faith the claim that Catherine and Heathcliff share a single spirit/soul. While the statement in this event that points to this conclusion is not a direct consequence of the glass-fire imagery, it is so intertwined with it in the text that I feel justified in citing it. The relevant remark by Catherine is "I ... wish us never to be parted—and should a word of mine distress you hereafter, think I feel the same distress underground."<sup>22</sup> Catherine, it seems, thinks that they can be united after her death through mutual distress or suffering. Clearly, in order for a physically dead Catherine to suffer concomitantly with Heathcliff, there must exist a spiritual bond (or, as I'm arguing, a "unity") between them.

This event marks a major structural turning point as a synopsis of the Catherine-Heathcliff relationship will show. Events prior to those mentioned in this paper, demonstrate that Catherine and Heathcliff can exist in harmony as two bodies. The injection of Edgar, and what he represents, into the situation initiates a break between Catherine and Heathcliff with suffering brought upon each of them. As events unfold for Catherine, a brief spiritual-physical encounter with Heathcliff becomes possible, but proves insufficient to restore the initial condition that existed between them. Catherine is now close to physical death and her spirit is focused beyond the earthly realm. This restricts the degree of unity possible between Catherine and Heathcliff at this meeting. As for what lies ahead, Catherine's last quoted remark to Heathcliff can be taken as prophesy. From what

we've seen, I offer the following seven statements characterizing the Catherine-Heathcliff relationship.

- 1) That one spirit/soul can harmoniously occupy two physical bodies so long as both individuals remain true to that spirit.
- 2) That the mental debasement of even one of the two persons, by earthly vanities, leads to physical separation and suffering.
- 3) That reconciliation begins only after the destruction of that part of the person that was debased.
- 4) That this suffering also leads to the physical destruction of the individual.
- 5) That as the body deteriorates, the soul, by degree, escapes its "shattered prison."<sup>23</sup>
- 6) That at this point (Statement #5 above), unification between the two persons, one in which the spirit is operating "normally" and the other in which it is transcending the body, is impossible.
- 7) That after the physical death of one of the individuals, suffering on the part of the other is felt by the interred corpse through the unity of the spirit. (Heathcliff's question "would you like to live with your soul in the grave?"<sup>24</sup> points to this conclusion.)

And tentatively:

- 8) That this suffering prevents total spiritual alienation until the living body also perishes. (Physical separation produces suffering which, in turn, promotes spiritual unity. Under the circumstances, though, Catherine and Heathcliff can only approach this ideal; never attain it.)
- 9) That upon the death of the second individual, spiritual unification is achieved. Harmony, as it had initially existed on the human level, now persists on the spiritual.

The eighth and ninth statements cannot be drawn from what has yet been stated, and indeed cannot be proved solely in terms of the glass-fire imagery. I've included these statements because they logically flow out of the previous statements, and because they provide a framework for the remainder of this essay.

Continuing with Event 6: Heathcliff is seen leaning against a chimney. Isabella describes the scene by saying "[Heathcliff's] eyes rained down tears among the ashes, and he drew his breath in suffocating sighs."<sup>25</sup> Isabella claims that Heathcliff acts this way in response to her charge that he was responsible for Catherine's death. Yet the extreme differences in the natures of Isabella and Heathcliff disqualify her as a credible interpreter of his emotional responses as has been seen, for example, in Event 1.

Recall that in Event 5 Heathcliff wept at the fireplace. The purification aspect present there is again invoked. That Heathcliff is still weeping, indicative of mortal suffering, coupled with the apparent expiration of the fire of purification, suggests that Heathcliff will not be experiencing much purification, at least not in the near future.

Isabella's comment brings to mind her unity with Edgar in signifying "human vanity," while Heathcliff and Catherine portray "spiritual unity"—concepts that stand in opposition to one another. Isabella's charging of Heathcliff with Catherine's death is ironic since she, through her association with Edgar, can also be regarded as a factor in Catherine's death. This aspect of Event 6 forges ties with the first event (Event 7) of Group 3. More importantly though, Heathcliff will need to endure a long separation from Catherine, even though the suffering that follows will ultimately bring them closer together.



Event 7, the prelude for the final two events of this essay, with its abstract imagery, sets the tone for Group 3, and is a major turning point in the changing character of the entire set of events from predominately physical to predominantly spiritual.

At the center of Event 7 is Cathy's developing relationship with Linton, which Edgar wants to stifle. To this end, Edgar tells Cathy of Heathcliff's "evil deeds." Nelly says of Edgar at this time "[Catherine] might have been living yet, if it had not been for him!" was [Edgar's] constant bitter reflection; and, in his eyes, Heathcliff seemed a murderer"<sup>26</sup>—an unsurprising perspective given Isabella's similar statement in the previous event. I suggest that Edgar's charge against Heathcliff is symbolically a reflection of himself. In accord with the mirror imagery, Edgar's mind is the mirror and this statement is his soul. Until this point, there is no explicit indication that Edgar even has a soul. The events of Group 1 establish Edgar as an earth-bound human lacking the spiritual dimension of Catherine-Heathcliff as shown in Group 2.

The acquiring of a soul by Edgar at this point suggests two things. First, that this soul has as its essence merely a thought in Edgar's mind. And second, that the creation of this soul has actually brought Edgar to even greater depths of spiritual non-existence. Recall that it was Catherine's mind debased by Edgar's influence that led to her fall. Edgar's soul as a creation of his mind, can be no better than the mind itself. Therefore, although Edgar is made more complete by the acquiring of a soul, the result is negative. Compared to Catherine-Heathcliff, Edgar is truly a pitiful figure, now more than ever.

The fire imagery in Event 7 involves the light of a candle. When Edgar discourages Cathy from meeting with Linton, she writes a letter to Linton explaining why she cannot visit him. Nelly, in an attempt to prevent Cathy from writing the letter threatens to "put out [the] candle."<sup>27</sup> The incident highlights a moral distinction between Cathy and Edgar, or between Cathy and Nelly. A more detailed explanation will necessitate moral judgments, which I wish to avoid.<sup>28</sup>

Event 8 evenly balances the triad concerned especially with the spiritual oneness of Catherine-Heathcliff. In the interest of brevity, I omit a recapitulation of the first two events (Events 2 and 5) of this sequence and proceed with explaining the significance of this one. Here it can be said that Heathcliff is undergoing a mental and physical purification similar to that experienced by Catherine in Events 4 and 5. Although details of Heathcliff's purification continue for several pages, the most significant passage among those associated with glass-fire imagery is that of Nelly's description of Heathcliff in his room: "He was leaning against the ledge of an open lattice, but not looking out; his face was turned to the interior gloom. The fire had smoldered to ashes."<sup>29</sup>

The open lattice recalls the open window of Event 4, through which Catherine's spirit was symbolically freed. Nelly's mention of Heathcliff not looking out, no doubt points to her inability to grasp the real reason that the window is open. That Heathcliff is not seeing anything that physically exists suggests a spiritual vision. The allusion to the fire smoldering to ashes is reminiscent of Event 6, although there is a marked difference in interpretation here due to its placement in the story and to the change in the glass imagery. In the present instance the imagery indicates that Heathcliff's physical purification and bodily destruction are nearly complete. The protracted sleeplessness and abstaining from nourishment endured by Heathcliff through this ordeal are merely the means to bring this about.

Event 9, Heathcliff's death, brings the glass and fire imagery into its tightest combination yet. Consider Nelly's description of the dead Heathcliff along with her comments about the surrounding circumstances: "I ran to uncloset the panels, for the chamber was vacant—quickly pushing them aside, I peeped in. Mr. Heathcliff was there—laid on his back. His eyes met mine so keen, and fierce, I started; and then he seemed to smile ... —he was dead and stark! I hasped the window; ... I tried to close his eyes—to extinguish, if possible, that frightful, life like gaze of exultation, before anyone else beheld it."<sup>30</sup> The allusion to the open window recalls Event 4. Now,

though, instead of the spirit moving out of the window, the suggestion is that the spirit, symbolized as natural forces (specifically: wind, rain), has entered Heathcliff's chamber. Initial mention of a vacant chamber suggests that Heathcliff is not really there although his body is shortly discovered. There is a definite "in-out" motion to all this, perhaps signaling the entrance of Catherine's "part" of the spirit and the exit of Heathcliff's with it. Holding to the view that there is only one spirit which existed prior to the existence of Catherine and Heathcliff, it is difficult (if not impossible) to explain the mystery of how it can simultaneously exist in two bodies. But the imagery here supports the claim that the spirit is somehow rejoining itself.

The fire imagery here is based on the use of the word "extinguish." Nelly's suggested failure to close Heathcliff's eyes and thus "extinguish" his gaze of exultation demonstrates the impossibility of further human interference in the relationship of Catherine and Heathcliff in their relationship. The closing of the window, in Event 4, seen as a hindrance to the soul is thus overcome. The soul of Catherine-Heathcliff is finally at peace.

## Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges the helpful comments of Eileen Patch and Todd Shuman on earlier drafts of this essay's 2017 edit.

## Endnotes

1. Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. David Daiches, The Penguin English Library (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, The Chaucer Press, 1965), 217.
2. *Ibid.*, 89.
3. *Ibid.*, 89.
4. *Ibid.*, 89.
5. "Hearth," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: Schribner's, 1951), 4:559.
6. *Wuthering Heights*, 96.
7. "Mirror," *Encyclopedia*, 7:696.
8. *Wuthering Heights*, 97.
9. *Ibid.*, 159.
10. *Ibid.*, 160.
11. *Ibid.*, 161.
12. "Mirror," *Encyclopedia*, 7:696.
13. "Midnight," *Dictionary of Superstition and Mythology*, 116.
14. *Wuthering Heights*, 163.
15. *Ibid.*, 163.
16. *Ibid.*, 165.
17. *Ibid.*, 165.
18. *Ibid.*, 193.
19. *Ibid.*, 196.
20. *Ibid.*, 196.
21. "Fire," *Encyclopedia*, 6:27.
22. *Wuthering Heights*, 196.
23. *Ibid.*, 196.
24. *Ibid.*, 198.



25. Ibid., 216.
26. Ibid., 257.
27. Ibid., 258.
28. "Light," *Encyclopedia*, 8:52.
29. *Wuthering Heights*, 359.
30. Ibid., 365.

### **Author's Note**

This essay was written as the 3rd of four required essays for a sophomore level English course at Binghamton University in 1972. Subsequent to submitting the essay for grading, while working on the fourth of those essays, I received a phone call from the course professor. He told me that because the length of my essay exceeded what he expected for the assignment I need not write the 4th essay. Instead, this essay would count as both essays—half of the course grade. While I was glad to have the additional time to study for final exams, I was apprehensive that my essay might fall short on measures of quality other than length. Fortunately, my concern was unfounded. I reproduce below the professor's grade and comments written on my essay.

"A+

"This is the best paper I've read in 4 years of grading them. Your very systematic mind, which enables you to categorize incidents, contributes largely to the very tight organization of the essay.

"Only occasionally do you have some light stylistic slips but these do not generally detract from the fine effort you have shown in handling the issues and motifs.

"Although it's a bit unusual to see Edgar and even Nelly as slightly despicable characters, you have managed to convince me that such is the case when they are compared to the spiritual 'union,' 'disintegration,' and 'reunion' which Heathcliff & Catherine represent.

"An absolutely superb job! Good luck in the future. JHD"