

Emerald Fennell's *Wuthering Heights*: Is this all that we can expect?

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Emily Brontë's 1847 novel *Wuthering Heights* is an astonishing work of art. Its wild intensity has attracted many filmmakers, with adaptations by directors as varied as William Wyler, Jacques Rivette and Luis Buñuel.

It deals with two landowning families on the Yorkshire moors, the Earnshaws at Wuthering Heights and the Lintons at Thrushcross Grange. The destructive passions between them centre on Heathcliff, the Earnshaws' fostered son. There is a fiery love between Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw, but he is brutalised and alienated by her brother Hindley.

Catherine loves Heathcliff but knows how low Hindley has brought him, making him a servant. Catherine marries Edgar Linton, by whom she has a daughter, Cathy Linton, dying soon after her child's birth. Having misunderstood Catherine's feelings for him, an angry Heathcliff exacts revenge on both families. He marries Edgar's sister Isabella and exploits Hindley's gambling debts to take over Wuthering Heights as mortgagee. After Hindley's death, Heathcliff subjects Hindley's son Hareton to the treatment he had endured. Heathcliff also tries to manipulate marriage between Cathy Linton and his own sickly and vicious son Linton Heathcliff in an attempt to dominate the landholding.

Wuthering Heights has what Charlotte Brontë called a "storm-heated and electrical atmosphere." Its force, its genius, is an almost organic expression of this devastating personal impact which has definite social roots in property relations. This is not a novel of happy endings, although it is a novel of hope in the possibility that they could exist.

Charlotte Brontë said her sister's book was "hewn in a wild workshop, with simple tools, out of homely materials." Had Emily lived to write more—she died of tuberculosis in 1848—she would have developed further, but this book stands as a testament to her talent.

Heathcliff seems a force of nature, his love and passion twisted into something vicious. Dark-complexioned and of mysterious origin, he is presented as being alien to the world of the Earnshaws and Lintons. Charlotte Brontë summarised the portrayal of this "unredeemed" figure, saying that only occasional glimpses of human feeling prevented us from saying "he was child neither of Lascar [a sailor or soldier from India] nor gipsy, but a man's shape animated by a demon life."

The passion between Heathcliff and Catherine is almost elemental. While much of the book's plot follows Catherine's death, that passion dominates.

To represent this on screen, many adaptations have omitted the stories of Cathy, Linton and Hareton. New generations respond enthusiastically to the emotional maelstrom, finding in it an expression of something that resonates with all human experience. The consuming fires of Heathcliff and Catherine's passion are always contemporary, so new generations continue to seek themselves in *Wuthering Heights*.

The stories of the younger family members, however, allowed Brontë to show Heathcliff's self-destructive vengeance in full flow. Adaptations without those narratives, therefore, have to find other ways of maintaining the depths of the central passion and its effects, most often through dominating central performances.

Wyler's Heathcliff, for example, was Laurence Olivier at his best. Few actors have reached Olivier's ability to combine love, self-hatred, passion and cruelty. But too often critics have complained that adaptations have been overwrought rather than intense.

This is perhaps the nicest comment that could be made about Emerald Fennell's dreadful film.

What is she seeking in *Wuthering Heights*? She omits the second half of the book but has nothing to replace its spiralling malevolence. The passion between Catherine (Margot Robbie) and Heathcliff (Jacob Elordi) is reduced to adulterous hot sex. Catherine's almost childish wildness becomes just self-indulgent petulance. Heathcliff's calculated cruelty is just a sado-masochistic sexual cruelty to Isabella that covers a devotion to Catherine that is too doe-eyed even to be misdirected.

The casting does not help. This looks like a vanity project for Robbie. Her strengths include a slightly cartoonish humour with a steely core. Reining in the slapstick (as she does here) gives her some scope—she did her best in Josie Rourke's flat *Mary Queen of Scots* (2018)—but leaves her adrift in insubstantial films. Her Catherine is petulant and uninteresting. As this Heathcliff is at bottom just sentimental, the result is a film directed only towards exonerating and redeeming that spoilt petulance.

Elordi is handsome and imposing, with a creditable Yorkshire accent, but that is all that can be said for his Heathcliff. This may not be all his fault, as Fennell used his looks in a similarly glib way in *Saltburn*. No one here, however talented, can escape the filmmaker's shallowness.

We hear of Heathcliff's temper without having seen it. He tells Nelly Dean (Hong Chau) that his sole purpose is tormenting Catherine. This chiefly involves chaining Isabella (Alison Oliver)

like a dog in what is clearly sexual degradation, while sending Catherine love letters which Nelly burns. Fennell mistakes repetition for intensity, but restated declarations of his love in three consecutive letters do not show us a man destroying himself with passion.

There is no sense here that Heathcliff is destroying himself at all. In the book, he does this through property relations and subjecting Hareton to the same degradation he endured. Fennell has abandoned these sections of the book. This need not be disastrous, but she also loses the depths in the relationship which would make Catherine genuinely interesting.

When Catherine tells Nelly she will marry Edgar (Shazad Latif), she says it would “degrade” her to marry Heathcliff. Heathcliff, eavesdropping, is devastated. He leaves without hearing Catherine continue, “so he shall never know how I love him.”

This is where the scene ends, revealing the gulf between Fennell and Brontë. In the book, Catherine goes on to say, “he shall never know how I love him; and that, not because he’s handsome, Nelly, but because he’s more myself than I am.”

She says, “My great miseries in this world have been Heathcliff’s miseries... my great thought in living is himself. If all else perished, and *he* remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger. I should not seem a part of it.”

None of this explanation of a profound emotional connection is present. It is well beyond Fennell, who is looking for superficial imagery as a substitute. It was almost a surprise to find she had filmed on location on the Moors, given how little use she makes of it. We only really see Brontë’s “wild workshop” when Elordi rides across it in longshot.

More of the film looks computer generated. Brontë’s landscape is often impassable because of the weather. Fennell’s weather is dry ice and CGI snowfalls. The gap between the rough-hewn Wuthering Heights and the sophisticated milieu of Thrushcross Grange is achieved by making the latter look like the set of a supermarket Christmas advertising campaign. There is no wuthering here, let alone heights.

Even the location shots are wasted. The film derails periodically into what look like bad promotional videos for the soundtrack’s new Charli XCX songs. There is nothing theoretically wrong with applying new materials in the interpretation, but what do they bring?

Here, nothing, which is unsurprising given Charli XCX’s own inclination to superficiality. Fennell has found a kindred spirit in the singer’s “petty squabbling within her upper-class social milieu.”

There is a tedious smugness here that has nothing to do with Brontë. There was a brief faux identity politics controversy around the casting of Elordi—Australian, from a Basque family—as the Gypsy Heathcliff.

One is sympathetic to calls to counter the still widespread anti-Gypsy racism. But these were misplaced here. Whether one argues that Brontë’s Heathcliff is a Gypsy or just “like” one is not the most important part of that portrayal, which is his difference from the Lintons. This is certainly physical, but it is explicitly about class and privilege. As a child, he complains to Nelly “I wish I had

light hair and a fair skin, and was dressed, and behaved as well [as Edgar], and had a chance of being as rich as he will be.”

That distinction becomes redundant in casting when the actor playing Edgar is of part-Asian origin. Latif, a terrific actor, works hard under adverse conditions. He, Chau and Martin Clunes (as Mr Earnshaw, Catherine’s father, incorporating elements of Hindley’s character) are all excellent under the circumstances.

But they cannot overcome Fennell’s basic class orientation. We noted that *Saltburn* left viewers feeling that “the real innocent victims of circumstance here are the indolent aristocrats.” Isabella, here, is so silly that Heathcliff’s cruelty seems barely worth the effort.

At the other end of the class scale we see Fennell’s limitations most clearly. Brontë gives a savagely satirical portrayal of Heathcliff’s servant Joseph, a pious religious hypocrite who stays at Wuthering Heights to pontificate with sanctimonious spite. Fennell’s Joseph (Ewan Mitchell) is just a lustful figure whom Catherine spies having bondage sex with a maidservant. As we noted of *Saltburn*, “The not-so-rich turn out to be just as foul or fouler than their ‘betters’.”

Nelly, the novel’s most sympathetic character, is redrawn in line with Fennell’s own preoccupations. Brontë’s sympathetic servant is here made a lady’s maid. Fennell’s concern is to show the injustice of class prejudice directed by the upper middle class against those slipping down its ranks.

In other hands, this might be interesting. But Fennell is relatively indifferent to the actual pauperisation of Heathcliff, whose exclusion takes the form of being made a servant. She is more interested in Nelly, because this is an injustice within the middle class milieu she inhabits.

Brontë’s primordial passion plays out often inarticulately in the mechanics of land ownership and household establishment. Fennell wants a passion disconnected from its social context. She is trying to create the impression of significance by a rather desperate recourse to ever more superficial effects.

Is this all that contemporary audiences can hope or look for in *Wuthering Heights*? Hardly. Brontë’s visceral and astonishing novel is rooted not just in a brutal landscape, but in a real world of class distinction and savagery that must find reflection in the passions of our daily lives. It is, in this sense, a genuine and exceptional work of art.

Fennell is seeking only the blandest of consolations for a very limited fraction of the upper middle class. Brontë does not exclude consolation, but there is nothing simplistic or simplified in her novel of the emotions. There is far more there than Fennell can find.



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