



Brontë's work relating to Sufism

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Sandra Monika Matissek^{1*}

Abstract

It is the aim of this abstract to draw a connection between Emily Brontë's work and Sufism. In her novel *Wuthering Heights* Brontë fleshes out the myriad hues of human personality development by juxtaposing and entwining the first and the second generation of main characters: the first generation is depicted by Catherine and Heathcliff and embodies the dangers of psychological stagnation. The second generation, namely Catherine and Hareton, are able to overcome their parents' destructive patterns. The depiction of both generations serves a double purpose: it enables the reader to track the characters' individual development and highlights intergenerational themes in the novel. It is this multi-faceted view of human nature that leads me to believe that

Wuthering Heights offers valuable psychological insights that can be interpreted as life lessons. As a psychoanalyst, I see literature as an additional tool for unearthing the subconscious. As a psychotherapist, I am convinced that bibliotherapy can stimulate the self-healing power of the patient's psyche and open up creative resources.

It is the aim of this abstract to show parallels between Brontë's work and Sufi concepts on three separate levels: firstly, I argue that Catherine's and Hareton's personality development mirrors the Sufi concept of the nafs. In his article "Exploring the Sufi Concept of Nafs", Thomas Cotterill depicts the nafs as psychological stages that change and develop over time.¹ When contemplating that developmental concept, the first thing that came to mind was the second generation's transformation in *Wuthering Heights*. Catherine's and Hareton's journey from ignorance and self-deceit to self-knowledge and wholeness is reminiscent of the Sufi "sequence of development of the nafs".² In Hareton's case, this development

¹Sigmund Freud University, Vienna, Austria

*Email: SMMatissek@aol.com

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consists of overcoming his lack of education. Catherine, who enjoyed a far more privileged upbringing than Hareton, uses her own knowledge to help and enlighten him. Yet, she has to surmount her own arrogance and pride before being in a position to help him grow. In doing so, she evolves from a spoiled only child to a compassionate and mature young woman. By complementing each other and enabling each other to grow, Catherine and Hareton become "one with themselves" which Thomas Cotterill views as a Sufi goal.¹ The following analysis is informed by my dual academic background in psychotherapy and British Studies and not necessarily religious studies. When reading about Sufism, I was deeply impressed by its rich historical and philosophical dimensions. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as the "mystical system of the Sufis".³ Interestingly, the very definition of Sufism seems to be linked to the concept of mysticism. Emily Brontë on the other hand has often "been called a mystic."⁴ That mystical dimension applies both to her novel and her poems.⁴ Therefore, I argue that mysticism is the second link between Emily Brontë's work and Sufism.

As a third case in point, Catherine's and Heathcliff's relationship mirrors "Sufi concepts of love".⁵ As children they are united by a "deep and mystical friendship"⁶ that later blossoms into a very unique kind of love. In the following quotation Catherine tells Nelly, the housekeeper, about her feelings for Heathcliff: "Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same" (p. 87).⁷ "My great miseries in this world have been Heathcliff's miseries and I watched and felt each from the beginning; my great thought in living is himself" (p. 88).⁷ As those quotations show, Catherine and Heathcliff appear to be one and the same. The nature of their love is so absolute that it dissolves the boundaries of identity. This is further illustrated by Catherine's words: "Nelly, I am Heathcliff" (p. 88)...⁷ According to Kamila Shamsie, this merging of identities "has resonances with Sufi concepts of love".⁵

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About the author

Sandra Monika Matissek received her Magister Artium in British Studies at the Johannes Gutenberg-University in Mainz (topic of MA thesis: identity). She is currently working as a psychotherapist in training (Individual Psychology) and earning her master's degree in psychotherapy at the Sigmund Freud University in Vienna.