

# Breaking the Taboo: Slavery and Dehumanization in Adaptations of Emily Brontë's "Wuthering Heights"

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Ljubica Matek, Assistant Professor

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## Abstract

This paper presents the analysis of the issue of slavery in William Wyler's *Wuthering Heights* (1939), Peter Kosminsky's *Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights* (1992), and Andrea Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* (2011), with respect to the portrayal of the character of Heathcliff, a dark-skinned, oppressed boy from Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights*. The first part of the paper discusses the socio-political circumstances of Brontë's time and the way they influenced the depiction of slavery in her novel, with a particular emphasis on the portrayal of Heathcliff. The main part of the paper explores the issue of slavery in the three adaptations of Brontë's novel by analyzing Heathcliff's background, social status, and his ability to climb the social ladder. The paper shows that the three adaptations considerably differ in their readiness to tackle the question of slavery, racial intolerance, and social injustice. The turbulent socio-political climate of Wyler's time impelled him to remove the potentially controversial racist elements from his adaptation and make it a romance, while the time distance and the convenient historical moment allowed Kosminsky to reveal racial animosity and violence underlying Brontë's novel in his adaptation. Likewise, the tendency of the twenty first century adaptations to address social injustice prompted Arnold to make her adaptation a social critique of white privilege. Paper reaches the conclusion that the readiness to depict social issues in adaptations depends on the suitability of the historical moment and the socio-political atmosphere; thereby contemporary adaptations explicitly address the issue of slavery, whereas the older ones avoid it.

Key words: race, slavery, dehumanization, adaptation, *Wuthering Heights*

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## Introduction

Although the definition of slavery has not changed throughout the history, people's attitudes towards it have, which is visible in various adaptations of Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights*. Readiness to address the issue of slavery largely depends on the historical period in which an adaptation is made, thus the newer adaptations are more prone to addressing socio-political issues, whereas the older ones avoid portraying them. Thereby, the renowned adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* by William Wyler bypasses the issue of slavery due to the controversial historical moment in which the adaptation was filmed. The adaptation was released in 1939, during the turbulent era burdened by racial intolerance preceding the Second World War. Tumultuous socio-political climate of Wyler's time clarifies why he decided to make his adaptation a romance and disregard the issue of racial oppression portrayed in the novel. On the other hand, the film *Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights*, directed by Peter Kosminsky in 1992, marks a step forward in tackling the issue of slavery. The film portrays the life of an oppressed dark-skinned boy, a former slave, who grows into a tyrant due to his desire for vengeance. The director did not hesitate to portray the racial violence and the hostility nurtured towards the racial others in human society for a long time. However, Andrea Arnold's adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, released in 2011, marked a turning point in openness towards depicting racial oppression in adapting Brontë's novel. Arnold's adaptation addresses the omnipresent problem of oppressing non-white people in the predominantly white European culture and reflects the emerging tendency of the twenty first century adaptations to speak out about social injustice. The aim of this paper is to show how the readiness to address the issue of slavery underlying Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights* and to portray the character of dark-skinned oppressed boy Heathcliff in adaptations depends on the historical moment and the socio-political atmosphere in which a screen adaptation is made. The first chapter will first describe the elements of slavery and dehumanization in Brontë's novel, by analyzing the protagonist's background, social status and his ability to climb the social ladder. The following three chapters will analyze the adaptations by Wyler, Kosminsky, and Arnold, and explore how they differ in portraying the issue of slavery, with respect to the protagonist's background, social standing, and his ability to change his place in the social hierarchy. The analysis of the three adaptations will show how the approach to the issue of slavery in adapting the novels has changed and advanced throughout the years, by relying on Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation*, Stam and Raengo's *A Companion to Literature and Film*, and Stam's article "Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation".



## 1. Racism, Slavery, and Dehumanization in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*

*Wuthering Heights* is not merely a romance with Gothic elements, but a historical, social, cultural, and political document. It is the testimony of the unprivileged and humiliating treatment of the non-white people in the predominantly white British Empire. It can be observed as a critique of colonialism, imperialism, Eurocentrism, and the white privilege. Brontë used Gothic elements to represent the prevalent skepticism towards the black people and wrote *Wuthering Heights* as the colonial Gothic: “the genre often turned the colonial subject into the obscene cannibalistic personification of evil, through whom authors could bring revulsion and horror into the text, thereby mirroring political and social anxieties close to home” (Hogle 231). *Wuthering Heights* is a reflection of the social tension in the British Empire during the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, which emerged due to the idea of the hierarchy of races and the belief in the “white supremacism or Anglo-Saxonism” (Brantlinger 2).

The novel was published in 1847, during the Victorian Era, and it “reflects the entire nineteenth-century racism in which people as a whole are constructed or stigmatised by class and interestingly by race and colour” (Althubaiti 202). However, its plot is not set in the nineteenth century, but in the second half of the eighteenth century, which is even more controversial considering the subject of race. The eighteenth century was a period when people were valued based on their race and when the slave trade was flourishing in the British Empire. The novel represents the cruelty of the white Englishmen and their desire to demonstrate their supremacy over the exploited and the oppressed people of color. Von Sneidern claims that “although slavery put sugar in their tea, coffee in their cups, cotton shirts on their back, and pounds sterling in their bank accounts, the institution made English blood run cold and warmed an Anglo-Saxon passion for appropriating the concept of liberty as its own” (173). All the data regarding time and place are arranged in a way that the reader can comprehend the historical background of the novel. The period in which the plot is set is significant because the story takes place before the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833 and “the full emancipation of the slaves in the British colonies in 1838” (Meyer 40). Brontë can be observed as both a witness and a historian in that regard, because she was born in 1818, and experienced the political and social atmosphere of the time, and *Wuthering Heights* can be observed as a written record of the oppression and violence the non-white people suffered in the British Empire: “Brontë locates her plantation colony not on the margins of the empire, some exotic island half way around the world, but in the heart of Yorkshire” in order to depict distorted social relations in the race-obsessed British Empire (Von Sneidern 174).

Brontë used Gothic imagery to represent “the concern that an expanding British Empire may bring Anglos face to face with the very racial others” (Hogle 5). Thus, in her novel *Heathcliff* is represented as a Gothic villain with demonic traits. Because “his bloodline is unambiguously tainted by color”, he is “a source of great anxiety for the mid-nineteenth century Victorian” (Von Sneidern 172). *Heathcliff* is the embodiment of the racial otherness and the menace that his race presents to the white people, especially after the abolition of slavery. The period in which the plot is set and the period in which the novel was published are both very controversial regarding the subject of race. Brontë’s novel exudes the tense atmosphere of the nineteenth century after the abolition of the slavery and proves that the Europeans and non-Europeans were not considered equal despite the newly gained independence. The novel is a reflection of the nineteenth century Victorian scientific racism which was based on the belief in the inferiority of the black race. Thus, Hunt in the paper “On the Negro’s place in Nature” from 1864 draws a comparison between the anatomical features of people of color and the Europeans. The paper proves that in the Victorian Era it was claimed that “the brain of the Negro had been proved to be smaller than in the European” (Hunt xv), and considered that “the Negro is inferior, intellectually, to the Europeans” (Hunt xvi). Therefore, Brontë’s novel can be observed as an expression of the scepticism towards the black people and the dehumanization of the black races still prevalent in the nineteenth century.

However, her novel symbolizes the fact that the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of slaves allowed her to speak out about the problems, because amid the slave trade it would not be allowed to mention it in the negative context. Meyer claims that there was “enough historical distance for Brontë to make a serious and public, although implicit, critique of British slavery and British imperialism” (71). The same phenomenon can be noticed in the adaptations of the novel, where readiness to speak out about the problems of race and slavery largely depends of the historical period and the political environment in which the adaptation was made. This is precisely apparent in Wyler’s adaptation, which was made during World War II, during which people were still imprisoned, oppressed, and taken to camps based on their racial and ethnical background. Thus, Wyler avoids addressing the issues connected to racial and ethnical abuse and exploitation, whereas Andrea Arnold in her adaptation from 2011 freely addressed such issues because the time distance from the actual social situation allowed her to do so.

## 1.1. Heathcliff's Background and Past

Although Heathcliff is described as dark-skinned numerous times in the novel, Brontë does not openly reveal his identity or descent. When he first came to the Wuthering Heights, Mr. Earnshaw presented him to his family as “a gift of God, though it’s as dark almost as if it came from the devil” (Brontë 29). This description is perplexing because it is not clearly stated at the beginning whether the blackness refers to the color of his skin, or to his cleanliness. The question of his descent is even more confusing because this description is furthermore expanded and the boy is characterized as “a dirty, ragged, black-haired child” (Brontë 29). Although the reader would assume that the boy was called ‘dark’ because he was unclean, the novel later reveals that the adjective was used to indicate the color of his skin and that “Heathcliff’s racial otherness cannot be a matter of dispute” (Von Sneidern 172). The constant allusions to the color of his skin do not completely reveal his heritage. He is frequently called “gypsy” by the Earnshaws and the Lintons, thus the reader would assume that he is of Romani descent. Meyer claims that the term “gipsy” is just “the generic designation for a dark-complexioned alien in England” (97). Hence the term is used as merely an allusion to the darkness of his skin and the stereotypes connected to it, and not as a designation of his ethnicity.

The novel implies the active role of the reader, thus the reader has to connect all the traces to construct the image of Heathcliff’s identity, which finally suggests that Heathcliff is a slave. Despite the fact that Heathcliff was found alone and parentless “in the streets of Liverpool” (Brontë 29), he cannot be classified as an orphan. Stuart Daley in his chronology of *Wuthering Heights* claims that Mr. Earnshaw brought Heathcliff home from Liverpool in 1771 (357), and during that time “the English city with the most spirited commerce in slaves was Liverpool” (Von Sneidern 171). The fact that the black boy was found alone and neglected in “the premier slaving port in Britain” is enough for the reader to make assumptions about his identity and conclude that he is a victim of the slave trade (Von Sneidern 172). Due to being notorious for slave trade, Liverpool carries strong symbolism, and it is the first implicit sign of Heathcliff’s identity and background. The reader can further conclude that Heathcliff is a former slave by learning that Mr. Earnshaw “inquired for his owner” when he first saw him (Brontë 29). The fact that Heathcliff had an owner indicates that slaves were treated as merchandise, which could be sold or bought. “Merchants and ship captains treated slaves as if they were commodities to sell” (Morgan 24). The fact that non-white people in the eighteenth century British Empire were observed as commodities is visible in the following sentence from the novel: “Not a soul knew to whom it belonged, he said, and his money and time being both limited, he thought it better to

take it home with him at once, than run into vain expenses there” (Brontë 30). This sentence implies that just the notion and sight of the black person evoked allusions to slavery in the minds of the white Britons. It signifies that the first thought that Mr. Earnshaw had after seeing this young boy is that he is someone’s lost property. Just the sight of a dark-skinned boy in Liverpool is enough for him to be immediately categorized as a “slave whose owner may have lost or abandoned him” (Althubaiti 205). That proves that non-white people in the British Empire of the nineteenth century were solely considered slaves, and treated in accordance with this stereotype.

Another thing that is indicative of Heathcliff’s background is the language he speaks and the way he communicates. Heathcliff’s means of communication indicates that he was raised in a culture different from European, which was considered uncivilized and barbarian by the Europeans. The language he speaks is defined as “some gibberish that nobody could understand” which makes everyone feel “frightened” (Brontë 29). By observing the novel chronologically, it is noticeable that Heathcliff is not familiar with the language the Earnshaws are speaking when he first comes to Wuthering Heights, but he eventually learns to speak English, as a result of being exposed to British culture and civilization for many years. The poor knowledge of English and lack of education the boy shows are ascribed to his coarseness and savageness. His lack of education and illiteracy signifies him being exposed to inhumane conditions and not his intellectual inferiority and the “low mental character of the Negro”, as the supporters of the Victorians scientific racism thought (Hunt xvi). Heathcliff’s illiteracy stems from the fact that the black people, and especially the ones being slaves, did not have the opportunity to get an education: “In very many examples, when the Negro has come in contact with European civilisation, he (. . .) worked to death and then replaced by other slaves” (Hunt xvii). Due to the prejudice about them and the advantage the white planters had from their physical labor, slaves remained illiterate their entire lives. The fact that Heathcliff learned to speak English signifies that he has broken the prejudice that “European civilization is not suited to the requirements and character of the Negro” and reveals all the inhumanity of the slave system (Hunt xvi). Thus Heathcliff’s initial lack of education signifies that he has been a victim of the slave system himself, and the fact that he is “a native speaker of ‘gibberish’ rather than English” signifies that he has come from a faraway country which has been tainted with the slave trade (Gubar 387).

Though Heathcliff is said to be “fatherless”, he is not an orphan (Brontë 30). Having spent his entire life a mere commodity of the slave owners, he does not know anything about his family, roots, and heritage. This is best illustrated in his conversation with Nelly Dean, when she says to him after washing him: “You’re fit for a prince in disguise. Who knows but your father was

Emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen” (Brontë 45). Nelly’s remark about Heathcliff’s foreignness does not shape him as an aristocrat, but it “constructs Heathcliff as a black and slave boy, who has been brought from foreign lands” (Althubaiti 2017). Nelly Dean, as one of the two narrators in the novel, is the character which gives the most information about Heathcliff’s background and openly alludes to his life as a slave. Although in the novel Nelly states that Heathcliff may be of noble birth, “kidnapped by wicked sailors, and brought to England”, all the previously mentioned clues help the reader to solve the mystery of his descent and conclude that he was not “brought to England” by “wicked sailors”, but by “wicked” slave traders (Brontë 45). Furthermore, Heathcliff’s reaction and habituation to the physical and verbal violence he often receives in *Wuthering Heights* signifies he has been exposed to the oppressive slaveholding system in which he learned to obey and endure any kind of maltreatment: “He seems to have been subject to slave trade, imported from foreign lands and to serve the white man” (Althubaiti 207). Nelly Dean points out that his behavior indicates that he was accustomed to oppression, tyranny and punishments: “He seemed a sullen, patient child, hardened, perhaps, to ill-treatment: he would stand Hindley's blows without winking or shedding a tear, and my pinches moved him only to draw in a breath, and open his eyes as if he had hurt himself by accident, and nobody was to blame” (Brontë 30). He continues to receive slave-like treatment in *Wuthering Heights*, and it is noticeable that he has before adopted the allowed pattern of behavior and applied it when he came to live with the Earnshaws. Heathcliff’s quietness, acceptance of the violence happening to him, the resignation and the apathy connected to it are significant of the poor treatment he was forced to endure. He is afraid to rebel when being mistreated, although he is claimed to be the equal member of the Earnshaw family and a brother to Catherine and Hindley.

## 1.2. Heathcliff's Social Status

The novel demonstrates the hardships people of color had to suffer due to the constant exposure to prejudice, stereotypes, and insults regarding their appearance and behavior. Brontë faithfully depicts stereotypes connected to slaves, which mainly consist in perceiving them as uncultivated beasts. The stereotype consists in observing “the non-European, in contrast to the civilized Englishman as a semi-evolved barbarian” (Hogle 231). Brontë vividly portrays the hypocrisy prevalent in the eighteenth century British Empire, which continued in the Victorian Era. This hypocrisy refers to the stereotypes that Caucasians have towards all other races. Although non-white characters are stereotyped as the barbarians and the savages, the cruelty that the white characters demonstrate in the novel shows that “it is the ‘pale ape,’ even more shockingly, who regresses into brutish animalism” (Hogle 231). Despite the widespread belief in the eighteenth and the nineteenth century that the black races are brutes and savages, the novel manages to prove just the opposite, because it is exactly Heathcliff, the oppressed primitive beast, who demonstrates the most humanity: “Heathcliff—despite the vindictiveness forced into his character by abuse and humiliation—is not only the only living person among the dead, the only civilized man among savages” (Nussbaum 403). No character but Heathcliff demonstrates unconditional selfishness towards the loved one; hence he neglects his feelings for Catherine’s sake and “sacrifices his own interests at every turn to hers, both before and after her death” (Nussbaum 403). Heathcliff’s unconditional love towards Catherine refutes the thesis about the savageness of the black races present in the Victorian Era.

The first remark and warning that Mr. Earnshaw gives to his family about the boy is that they must “take it as a gift of God, though it’s as dark almost as if it came from the devil” (Brontë 29). This description of Heathcliff encompasses all the negative feelings bred towards racially ‘other’ people in the British Empire. It is noticeable that Mr. Earnshaw refers to the homeless boy as “it”, and this pronoun comprises the disparagement, oppression, and dehumanization that the black boy experiences. Mr. Earnshaw addressing the boy as “it” shows that although he wants to be a benefactor, his attempt to help a dark-skinned person in the eighteenth century Britain seems hypocritical. It proves that even Mr. Earnshaw, Heathcliff’s only father and the person with the kindest intents for him, did not truly consider him completely equal to the other people, respectively white people, in the household: “Heathcliff is inserted into the close-knit family structure as an alien; he emerges from that ambivalent domain of darkness which is the ‘outside’ of the tightly defined domestic system” (Eagleton 102). Thus his attempts to prove himself as an equal man to all the white characters become futile and unsuccessful, because the

novel shows that the color of the skin was the only burden Heathcliff was unable to shrug off. Due to his inferior status in *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff “spends all his life trying to shed off his blackness and to prove his power and independence as an equal ‘black man’ to Catherine, and to the other whites around him” (Althubaiti 201-202). The pronoun “it” is very symbolical of Heathcliff’s life in *Wuthering Heights* because he is treated and observed as merely a worthless object. Nelly addresses him as a “stupid little thing”, and thus deprives him of his inherent human characteristics, dehumanizing him (Brontë 30). Brontë vividly depicts the disrespect the white people demonstrated towards other races in the eighteenth century, and the perceived threat that the people of color became to the white people afterwards, following the abolition of slavery in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Brontë shows that the British Empire was merciless and inexorable when it came to demonstrating racial equality, even when it became statutory and a legally required thing to do. Thus, Heathcliff’s life in *Wuthering Heights* turns into an incessant need to prove his worth and equality. “Heathcliff tries all the time to revise and reconstruct his own position and the social ranks as a whole, to identify his own social position within a class hierarchy” (Althubaiti 203). This is depicted in the seventh chapter, when Heathcliff attempts to dress up nicely to fit in with Catherine’s new genteel friends, the Lintons. The novel shows that Heathcliff despises his heritage because he blames the color of his skin for all the difficulties he faces, and thinks that the change in his physical appearance would dispel all the hardships he has to suffer due to it. Thus he covets Edgar Linton’s looks, because Edgar’s white skin and blue-bloodedness implies having all the privileges and opportunities the white people have in the eighteenth century: “I wish I had light hair and a fair skin, and was dressed and behaved as well, and had a chance of being as rich as he will be” (Brontë 45). The novel proves that the discrepancy in race was considered the biggest discrepancy of all. Although Heathcliff was washed and dressed nicely, he still did not fit in, but ridiculed by Hindley for it: “Begone, you vagabond! What! you are attempting the coxcomb, are you? Wait till I get hold of those elegant locks—see if I won’t pull them a bit longer!” (Brontë 46). Heathcliff’s “blackness” was considered an irreconcilable difference between him on the one hand, and the Earnshaws and the Lintons on the other hand. It was a difference more significant than the difference in class or money, and an unbridgeable gap between him and the two families. The problem between Heathcliff and other characters did not stem from him being dishevelled or having ragged clothes, but from his background, which could not be changed, unlike the clothes.

Stereotypes about the black people are expressed in the derogatory language used to demean them. Brontë vividly depicts all the stereotypes prevalent in the eighteenth and the nineteenth century by using the discourse of race. Althubaiti points out that “Emily Brontë’s metaphorical, though rather sporadic, use of race and slave discourse in *Wuthering Heights* (. . .) answers many questions in the novel” (202). The use of race discourse in Brontë’s novel gives a clear picture of the social injustice of her time and reveals a lot about the protagonist’s social status in the society with distorted perception of race. Throughout the novel Heathcliff is addressed with multiple derogatory names, but they are all equal in the sense that they refer to him “as inferior, animal or devil-like creature” (Althubaiti 206). Most of the racist remarks directed towards Heathcliff rely on the belief that, due to the inherent characteristics of the black races, like the texture of their hair, they are inferior to the white race. Therefore, in the seventh chapter Edgar compares Heathcliff’s black curly hair with “a colt’s mane” (Brontë 46). Comparing the black people and their appearance with animals is used to devalue them, and though such words “do not explicitly carry the term “black”, they “tend to be associated with black people and in effect are also employed to belittle, demean, and insult black people on the basis of their race” (Shehu 322).

Brontë was determined to depict racial categorization by showing that the value the characters attribute to each other is entirely based on the color of their skin. Sonstroem emphasizes that Brontë “addresses herself less to vision than to blindness: to man’s refusal to overlook his prejudices, and his inability to discern what lies beyond his limitations” (51). This is faithfully portrayed in the sixth chapter when Catherine and Heathcliff are caught spying at the Lintons. Mister Linton, based solely on their appearance and the color of their skin, calls Catherine “a little girl” and Heathcliff “an out-and-outer” (Brontë 39). Categorization on the basis of race and the accompanying stereotypes are vividly portrayed in the same chapter, when Mister Linton disparages Heathcliff and suggests “would it not be a kindness to the country to hang him at once, before he shows his nature in acts, as well as features” (Brontë 39). Both examples demonstrate that “in Heathcliff’s dark face, the Lintons read his nature and destiny, and they find in it a license to punish him for crimes of property putatively committed by others of similar appearance” (Meyer 97). Merely Heathcliff’s presence was enough for him to be considered a threat and a menace to the society, due to society’s stereotypes about the non-whites being savages and dangerous. The allusion to lynching is not purely a sign of Mister Linton being scared, but a sign of him wanting to demonstrate his power, superiority, and domination as a white male. Markovitz claims that “lynch mobs typically worked to ensure that black audiences were aware of the strength of white supremacy and the costs of violating the boundaries of the



racial order” (xvi). Thus the verbal and physical violence against the non-whites cannot be understood as a fear of the alleged primitivism, barbarianism, and savagery of the non-whites, but the desire of the whites to prove their preponderance.

The hatred towards Heathcliff starts at the very beginning of his residence in Wuthering Heights, when Catherine finds out “the master had lost her whip in attending on the stranger” (Brontë 30). The fact that her wish to get a whip is unfulfilled due to the black homeless boy provokes anger, and she punishes Heathcliff “by grinning and spitting at the stupid little thing” (Brontë 30). Von Sneidern emphasizes that the presents Mr. Earnshaw promised to bring his children, a whip for his daughter and a fiddle for his son, are both “objects emblematic of the cruelty and indolence nurtured by institutionalized slavery” (172). A whip, the emblem of slavery, is symbolic of the life and the hierarchy in Wuthering Heights. It is an instrument of the white people for demonstrating their power over the blacks. Therefore, even the young Catherine’s “first recorded desire is for a whip”, despite the fact that she is the youngest member of the Earnshaw family and still a child (Glen 90). Gubar points out that “symbolically, the small Catherine's longing for a whip seems like a powerless younger daughter's yearning for power” (386). Thus the whip that Catherine requires for taming the horse is later on used by Hindley to tame Heathcliff, by which Brontë shows that both animals and black people had the same status and were considered dangerous beasts that could harm their surroundings if not tamed by their masters. Hence Hindley would occasionally “order Heathcliff a flogging”, not to merely punish him for an alleged misdeed, but to show his supremacy and subdue the black boy (Brontë 30). The whip is an object that carries powerful symbolism throughout the novel because Heathcliff experiences great suffering due to it. Furthermore, a fiddle – a gift that Hindley was promised to get – is an equally significant symbol of slavery as a whip. Jenoure points out that the fiddle had the role of “providing music not only for blacks but for the white slave owners on holidays and for their private parties”, (79) thus “by the 1800's, the black fiddler had become a celebrated figure, essential to the success of social events” (73). The two objects, a whip and a fiddle, implicitly announce the social hierarchy in Wuthering Heights following Heathcliff’s arrival, which is unquestionably reminiscent of the social hierarchy present in a slaveholding system. The relationships between the characters are based on inequality and rigorous social stratification, where the Earnshaws have the status of the all-powerful slave owners, and Heathcliff is “constructed as, the black sheep of the family, the submissive servant, "lamb," and slave of the house, whose position is always at the stables” (Althubaiti 205).

### 1.3. Heathcliff's Ability to Climb the Social Ladder

The novel proves that no black man could fully be a master of his own happiness in the eighteenth century, due to the widespread slave trade, and even in the nineteenth century, due to the popular prejudice among the Victorians that no black man can ever be fully civilized. The notion of civilization was considered to be of the utmost importance in the Victorian Era, because “the Victorian social order was governed by a dominant ideal of ‘culture’ or ‘civilisation’” (Rich 209-210). Brantlinger claims that “for many Victorians, the idea of taming cannibals or civilizing savages was oxymoronic: civilization was a goal that the nonwhite peoples of the world could not attain”, and still “the “civilizing mission” was viewed as the ultimate justification for imperialism” (2). The fact that it is impossible for Heathcliff to acquire the status of a civilized man is visible after his return to the Yorkshire Moors, following many years of his absence and drastic physical change: “A half-civilized ferocity lurked yet in the depressed brows and eyes full of black fire, but it was subdued; and his manner was even dignified, quite divested of roughness, though too stern for grace” (Brontë 75). Although Heathcliff came back to *Wuthering Heights* completely transformed, he is referred in the book as “half-civilized”, because it is implied that he can never be fully-civilized due to his race. He is described as an animal which has finally been tamed and “subdued”, and not as a man who succeeded on his own and managed to break down the prejudice that society imposed upon him.

The novel shows that the Caucasians wanted to demonstrate their supremacy by insisting on the racial segregation. The case of Heathcliff's segregation from the rest of the family is not based on his social class, but on his skin color. Heathcliff's isolation from other characters demonstrates that the problem is not the gap in social status between him and the white characters, because the gap in social status does not prevent the Lintons and the Earnshaws from being friends. The problem lies in the color of his skin, a thing that could not be changed or altered, unlike financial or social status: “From the very beginning of the novel Heathcliff (. . .) is constructed in a subtly racist discourse as belonging to a filthy, wild-looking and dreadfully primitive class, which later makes Catherine dreadfully and bewilderingly unable to marry him though she is irretrievably in love with him” (Althubaiti 204). While still a boy, Heathcliff is not allowed to be in the same room with the white people because of all the negative assumptions about the people of color. Thus Hindley commands Joseph to “keep the fellow out of the room—send him into the garret till dinner is over”, because “he'll be cramming his fingers in the tarts, and stealing the fruit, if left alone with them a minute” (Brontë 46). The same problem is noticeable later on, when Heathcliff returned to the Yorkshire Moors as a newly rich, Edgar

Linton still “suggested the kitchen as a more suitable place for him” to eat, instead of the parlor (Brontë 75). High social status was not a prerequisite to enter the high society, as the Earnshaws prove, but being white-skinned was prerequisite to acquire the right to be treated humanely. Heathcliff’s stagnation on the social scale is metaphorical of the social situation of Brontë’s time and the fact that even after the abolition of slavery, black people were still downgraded. Heathcliff’s inability to climb the social ladder symbolizes “the mid-century England where the problems of race and slavery did not vanish with emancipation” (Von Sneidern 175).

Although Heathcliff’s life in *Wuthering Heights* seems different while he is under the patronage of Mr. Earnshaw, his benefactor, Hindley misuses his power after the death of Mr. Earnshaw and reduces Heathcliff to a slave-like status: “He drove him from their company to the servants, deprived him of the instructions of the curate, and insisted that he should labour out of doors instead” (Brontë 36). Even after the years of his absence and despite his new lofty countenance, Heathcliff is still referred to as “the ploughboy” (Brontë 74). It is impossible for him to escape the stereotypes that the white racist society imposes upon him due to the established prejudice about the inferiority of the black races: “The nineteenth-century mythology of black races as essentially rural and pastoral peoples governed by norms and values inherently antithetic to those of the urbanised and advanced metropolitan races of Western Europe and North America thus continued to shape and guide much of mainstream thinking in Britain on race up to the Second World War” (Rich 208). Unfounded explanations such as alleged innate inferiority of the black races were used as a justification for a long history of the poor treatment, oppression, and exploitation of the people of color.

Dark-skinned Heathcliff is portrayed as an inherently inferior figure doomed to be on the bottom of the social hierarchy. His success is not enough for him to shed the labels that society placed on him as a black man. Despite his newly-gained richness, he continues to be labeled as a man subordinated to the white race and referred to as a slave. Hence, when talking to Catherine, Edgar tells her: “The whole household need not witness the sight of your welcoming a runaway servant as a brother” (Brontë 75). Edgar’s racist remark about Heathcliff being a servant is a reflection of the Victorian scientific racism, which promoted the belief that black people are under any condition “incapable of exercising any leading position in the world, and that they are best off when slaves or in an analogous position” (Hunt xviii). Therefore, Heathcliff is unable to become a romantic hero or to marry Catherine because he cannot escape the identity that society has created for him and be seen as anything but a slave.

## 2. Wyler's Adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* (1939)

The popularity of Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights* resulted in numerous adaptations, all focusing on different elements of the novel. One of the most famous adaptations of Brontë's novel is the one from 1939, which is directed by William Wyler and produced by Samuel Goldwyn. Wyler's adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* "turned out to be one of his most honored and well-known works" and "received eight Oscar nominations, including one for Wyler's direction" (Miller 157). In this adaptation, the focus is placed on the intricate love story between Catherine and Heathcliff, and thereby the social, cultural, and political stratification of the novel is disregarded. While "all the film's energy is concentrated in its obsessive focus on the two lovers' tempestuous and destructive passions", Wyler avoids addressing the issue of racial oppression, which forms the basis for understanding the relationships between characters in Brontë's novel (Miller 159). Turbulent and controversial socio-political atmosphere of filmmakers' time provides an answer to why Wyler decided to make his adaptation a romance and disregard still topical social commentary underlying the source text.

In her work, *A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon claims that adaptation is largely dependent on the current state of affairs and the historical period in which it is made, the fact which Wyler's adaptation largely illustrates: "Readiness to reception and to production can depend on the "rightness" of the historical moment" (143). The historical period and socio-political climate in which Wyler's adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* was made had a great influence on portraying the socio-political issues that are addressed in the novel. Wyler's adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* was released in 1939, at the very outset of the Second World War. The period in which the film was released is known for the poor treatment of the black races and "the political manipulation of race for political purposes, especially with the advent of fascism and Nazism in the late 1920s and 1930s" (Rich 209). When it comes to the question of Heathcliff's race and ethnicity, Wyler sticks to the literal meaning of the source text and does not go into detailed analysis, thus he defines him as a dark-skinned Romani. Although in Wyler's film Heathcliff is formally referred to as an oppressed dark-skinned boy, Wyler avoids visually portraying the issue of oppressing people on the basis of their skin color or ethnicity because the historical moment was not convenient. Wyler's decision to use the indefinite term such as "gypsy" as a definite designation for Heathcliff's identity is merely a formal act of staying faithful to the literal meaning of the source text and not going in depth when it comes to analyzing the question of race.

By omitting all the racist elements from the film, the director disregards the socio-political reality of his time, the reality which also consisted of abusing and oppressing racial minorities, especially the Romani. Lewy claims that “ever since the Gypsies appeared in central Europe in the early fifteenth century, they have been expelled, branded, hanged, and subjected to various other kinds of maltreatment” (1). The poor treatment of the Romani largely continued in the twentieth century, especially at the dawn of the Second World War. Tyrnauer claims that only “under Hitler’s rule approximately half a million European Gypsies were systematically slaughtered” (97). A parallel can be drawn between the status of the black races in Victorian England and in Europe in the early twentieth century. The fear of racial mixing was present in the British Empire for a long time, as well as in pre-war Europe. Due to the belief in the supremacy of the white race, which shaped the policy known as “racial hygiene”, the Romani were largely marginalized. Racial hygiene, as well as Victorian scientific racism, was “based upon a hierarchy of races, with the white Anglo-Saxon at the top, and upon the inherent antipathy of races to ‘miscegenation’ and inter-racial liaisons, for these produced a ‘mongrealisation’ of the white race” (Rich 208-209). Wyler’s decision to portray Heathcliff as a victim of the racial oppression would spark a lot of controversy at the time when this problem was still very much omnipresent and racial minorities were being despotized. Hutcheon claims that “sometimes adapters purge an earlier text of elements that their particular cultures in time or place might find difficult or controversial” (147). With this film, Wyler bypasses the socio-political issues underlying Brontë’s novel, refuses to look beyond the mere surface of the novel, and focuses on the love story. This can be ascribed to the controversial socio-political situation in the late 1930s which can be identified with the turbulent socio-political situation when the novel was made. By refusing to make his film a “critique of quietly assumed, unmarked normativities, which place whiteness, Europeanness, maleness, and heterosexuality at the center, while marginalizing all that is not normative”, his film becomes the proof that all the mentioned ‘normativities’ and values were present when Wyler adapted the novel into film (Stam and Raengo 11). Wyler avoids depicting Heathcliff’s physical features in accordance with the origin he ascribed to him, he omits to portray the violence done to the boy triggered by the color of his skin, and refuses to portray him as a man destined to doom due to the socio-political circumstances in which he was born. The director changes all the potentially racist elements of the source text and makes it racially neutral, because the film was adapted in the time when modern slavery was in force. His adaptation demonstrates the fact that almost a century was not enough for the progress to happen when it comes to tackling the issue of slavery – an issue that has been burdening the society for a long time.

## 2.1. Heathcliff's Background and Past

Whereas Brontë's novel can be defined as a historical romance about the life of a slave who is destined to experience hardships due to living in a predominantly white racist society, Wyler suppresses the historical part of the novel and the accompanying critique of slavery and makes his adaptation a romance. Stam claims that "many revisionist adaptations of Victorian novels" are prone to "de-repress them", especially in "political terms" (42). In accordance to that, many elements that allude to Heathcliff's background and his past as a slave are omitted or changed. Whereas Brontë's "*Wuthering Heights* is the site in which the problematics of an Anglo-Saxon mythology saddled with the fact of slavery and the "fact" of race are revealed", Wyler's adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* is the site in which the issue of slavery and race are obliterated (Von Sneidern 174). Thereby, in Wyler's adaptation Heathcliff is depicted as white-skinned, eloquent, literate, educated, and well-read boy.

Stam and Raengo rely on the performativity theory and describe "both novel and adaptation" as "performances, one verbal and the other visual, verbal, and acoustic" (10). When taking performativity theory into consideration, Wyler's adaptation displays the discrepancy between the verbal and the accompanying visual part, between Heathcliff's declared physical characterization and background, and its visual portrayal. The first thing that indicates the boy's slave past is that he came from the Liverpool and that his owner was gone. Wyler follows the source text in a literal manner, thus all the data about his background as a slave are present in the film, and they are even enriched compared to the source text, thus it is said that the boy was found in a poor condition, which further suggests that he has been exposed to the violent slave system:

MR. EARNSHAW: I found him starving in the streets of Liverpool, kicked, and bruised, and almost dead.

DR. KENNETH: So you kidnapped him.

MR. EARNSHAW: Not until I spent two pounds trying to find out who its owner was. But nobody would lay claim to him, so rather than leaving him as it was, I brought him home. (00:11:17-00:11:26).

All the mentioned information lead to the conclusion that the boy has a slave past; he is said to have an “owner” who left him, he is treated like a property to which “nobody would lay claim to”, and his declared physical condition displays evidence of exposure to ill treatment, brutality, and tyranny. However, Heathcliff is claimed to be a slave only declaratively and there are no visual traces of Heathcliff being maltreated, kicked, and bruised. Haire-Sargeant claims that “where the novelist's words spark individual, intimate mind pictures in each reader, the filmmaker must define the image on the screen” (411). However, the verbal part of the adaptation is not supported by complementary visual images when it comes to vivifying controversial issues such as dehumanization of the racial others.

Heathcliff is described as dark-skinned numerous times in the novel, but his descent is never explicitly defined. Because “his ‘darkness’ argues equally well for origins in India, Africa, America, England’s Romani population”, the reader is allowed to make its own conclusions about Heathcliff’s ethnicity (Bardi 116). Novel allows this ambiguity, unlike films: “Unlike in novels, appearance and description in the cinema are grounded in the concrete and specific” (Stam and Raengo 37). Wyler demonstrates inconsistency by sequentially classifying Heathcliff as a “gypsy”, and yet omitting to cast an actor of the Romani descent in order to show Heathcliff as a Romani in his physical features as well. Wyler, as well as the most filmmakers who adapted the novel, takes a stance that Heathcliff is dark-skinned and yet he does not show it by casting a dark-skinned actor whose appearance symbolizes all the accompanying difficulties arising from being dark-skinned in the Victorian England or in his own time. In the adaptation from 1939 numerous parts that could bear any connotations to the issues of race and slavery were avoided or deliberately changed, which can be ascribed to aggravating circumstances of the time, precisely the tense political climate and environment. Stam claims that “adaptations “adapt” to changing environments and changing tastes, as well as to a new medium, with its distinct industrial demands, commercial pressures, censorship taboos, and aesthetic norms” (3). The fact that the director opted for a Caucasian actor can be ascribed to the fact that casting a dark-skinned actor would be controversial during the 1930s, and it could be understood as a protest or rebellion against the social injustice of the time, which was not allowed in the old totalitarian regime.

All the mentioned data lead to the conclusion that Wyler did not intend to portray Heathcliff as a slave and decided to stay politically neutral. In the novel Heathcliff is depicted as an uncouth boy with no signs of exposure to civilization, which leads to the conclusion that he comes from a non-European cultural background and that he has been enslaved as a child. The

first thing that alludes to his distant origin is the language he speaks, because it is unfamiliar to all the characters around him and it is defined as “some gibberish that nobody could understand” (Brontë, 29). On the other hand, in Wyler’s adaption, all the elements are combined to depict Heathcliff as a non-slave. He is portrayed as an eloquent boy who speaks English fluently and shows signs of being exposed to British culture and civilization. According to Miller, excessive literariness of Heathcliff’s speech even gives the impression of unnaturalness and artificiality. Thus when observing the actors who embody Heathcliff, there is a visible “struggle with dialogue that is overly literary” (163). Wyler’s adaptation does not portray Heathcliff as an illiterate and uneducated boy, which means that he is not meant to be portrayed as a slave. Quite the contrary, he is portrayed as a young literate and well-read boy, who at the very arrival at Wuthering Heights displays the same level of education as young Hindley and Catherine. The fact that Heathcliff is well-read is depicted in the scene where Catherine and Heathcliff form a friendship shortly after his arrival and go picking harebells on Penistone Crag. Catherine tells him he must be “a prince in disguise” (00:16:04-00:16:05), to which Heathcliff responds by saying: “All the princes I ever read about had castles” (00:16:21-00:16:24). Wyler alludes that Heathcliff has been educated and learned to read prior to his arrival to Wuthering Heights and thereby dismisses the possibility that he was a slave. Thereby he also avoids addressing the prevalent prejudice that the black races were considered an intellectually inferior race in comparison with the white race. Wyler’s adaptation disengages from being a social critique, thus he omits all the polemical content from his adaptation. Stam points out that “each re-creation of a novel for the cinema unmask facets not only of the novel and its period and culture of origin, but also of the time and culture of the adaptation” (45). By adding this scene and avoiding addressing the prejudice about the intellectual inferiority of the people of color, he proves that this problem was still burdening the society during the process of making the film.

In the adaptation, Heathcliff is not meant to be represented as an uncouth and uncivilized boy. Whereas in the novel he is characterized as “a dirty, ragged, black-haired child” whose barbaric appearance, behaviour, and attitude everyone feel “frightened” (Brontë 29), in the adaptation he is not meant to be depicted as a ferocious figure. Thus, when introducing him to his children, Mr. Earnshaw avoids Gothic imagery to present the boy as an embodiment of the devil and addresses him as “a little gentleman” (00:12:41-00:12:42). Heathcliff reacts to Mr. Earnshaw’s benevolence with a long hug (00:13:10-00:13:13), which again symbolizes that the boy is not a savage and that he does not consider the Earnshaws as the family of white oppressors and slave owners, since he is not intended to be represented as slave, but merely as a homeless boy.



Heathcliff demonstrates mildness and warmth by showing gratitude and giving a hug to his benefactor. Such gesture signals his background in the same way as his skin color, the language he is speaking, and his level of education. Hutcheon claims that “facial expressions, dress, and gestures take their place along with architecture and sets to convey cultural information” (30). His gestures and body language imply that the boy has not been victimized prior to coming to Wuthering Heights, and that he develops a close relationship with the Earnshaws. On the other hand, “in the novel the Heights, corrupted by the introduction of the racially other, is the place, where the figures of a system of bondage work out their relationships” (Von Sneidern 174). Whereas Brontë draws a parallel between the Earnshaws and the slave owners in her novel, Wyler depicts them as a loving welcoming family. Since “both novel and film are communicative utterances, socially situated and historically shaped”, it is logical that Wyler’s adaptation differs from Brontë’s novel (Stam 10). Wyler’s reluctance to explicitly address the issue of the slavery stems from the fact that the adaptation is socially and historically conditioned, which prevents him from thoroughly exploring the question of race and slavery in a racially-intolerant socio-political system that still implemented slavery via concentration camps and forced labor.

## 2.2. Heathcliff's Social Status

In Wyler's adaptation, many implicit signs of degrading, underestimating, or belittling people on the basis of their race or ethnicity are omitted: "Some critics, such as Graham Greene, felt the film missed the coarseness and carnality of the novel and diluted its passion and violence" (Sinyard 59). By neglecting the violence done to Heathcliff due to his race and his low social status, Wyler neglects the historical reality of Victorian Era and his time. This is mostly visible in the way the white-skinned characters act towards the racially "other" Heathcliff. When Mr. Earnshaw claims that the boy is "as dark as if he came from the Devil" (00:11:10-00:11:12), it is notable that he uses the pronoun "he" and not "it". When in the novel he claims "it's as dark almost as if it came from the devil" (Brontë 29), the pronoun "it" is strongly symbolic of the boy's inferiority and his low social status in the family. On the other hand, in Wyler's adaptation, Mr. Earnshaw calls the boy "he", and thus distances himself from the issue of dehumanizing and downgrading people of color. In Brontë's novel this pronoun carries strong symbolism because it alludes to the tacit, but present agreement that there is a "difference between the Negro and the higher and white races of mankind" (Hunt xxiv). The same thing is noticeable in the scene where Mr. Earnshaw introduces the boy to his children. After seeing Heathcliff for the first time, Catherine asks her father: "Who's that?", to which Mr. Earnshaw responds: "This is a little gentleman I met in Liverpool who has accepted my invitation to pay us a little visit" (00:12:35-00:12:44). Catherine's question reveals that in the adaptation Heathcliff is not considered to be inferior because he is referred to as a human being. She uses interrogative pronoun 'who' instead of 'what', which shows that he is not intended to be dehumanized or portrayed as a boy of a lower social status, which is the case in the novel. Moreover, this scene shows that Heathcliff is not meant to be depicted as an oppressed slave, since he is called "a little gentleman", and not a "stupid little thing", as he is called in the novel (Brontë 30).

Wyler sticks to the literal meaning of the source text in his adaptation, but he diverges from it in the scenes that are likely to turn out controversial. This is visible in the scene where Mr. Earnshaw returns from Liverpool and brings presents to his children, and simultaneously avoids depicting their rage towards Heathcliff because they did not get their presents. In the novel, Mr. Earnshaw does not get his children the gifts he promised, but "in lieu of a whip for Cathy and a fiddle for Hindley, (. . .) Earnshaw substitutes Hindley" (Von Sneidern 172). Thus Heathcliff's arrival at Wuthering Heights is accompanied by a degrading act of Catherine "spitting at the stupid little thing" (Brontë 30). On the other hand, Wyler avoids depicting the newcomer in such a humiliating situation and changes such potentially controversial element. The director deprives

the adaptation of the violent content; hence the scene of Earnshaw's arrival in Wuthering Heights and Heathcliff's introduction to the children gives the impression of a family idyll. In the adaptation the children get their presents intact, which concurrently dispels the possibility of them acting violent towards Heathcliff. "Hollywood adaptations often "correct" their sources by purging the source of the "controversial" (Stam 43). Likewise, Wyler in his adaptation abandons elements that could be interpreted as violent or racist, which includes Catherine spitting on Heathcliff. Wyler sidesteps this part, and even changes the course of the events in which children eventually get their presents and thus avoids the scene with spitting. This can be ascribed to racism being a taboo in 1939, and the director's desire to avoid addressing it, focusing only on the Gothic elements. Wyler completely bypasses the topic of racism in order to avoid all the accompanying controversy, even if it means neglecting the cultural, social, and political background of the novel.

Wyler shows resistance to admit the omnipresent problem of oppressing non-white people in the dominantly white European culture, which reflects the fact that "Hollywood films tend to be phobic toward any ideology regarded as "extreme" (Stam and Raengo 43). Therefore, the director obliterates any traces of abusing non-white people in European society marked by white supremacy, which includes portraying physical as well as verbal violence. Whereas Brontë vividly depicts racial hatred, Wyler is not prone to reviving racial discourse and racist remarks, one of which is the allusion to lynching the non-white people. Wyler changes the scene in which Mr. Linton suggests that the dark-skinned boy should be hanged "before he shows his nature in acts, as well as features" (Brontë 39). In his adaptation, after Catherine is bitten by the dog, it is Heathcliff who threatens the Lintons, to which Mr. Linton suggests his servants to escort him to the door:

HEATHCLIFF: You'll pay for this!

(. . .)

MR. LINTON: Pack this fellow off.

HEATHCLIFF: I'm going. I'm going from here and from this cursed country both.

(00:27:36-00:28:01).

In the adaptation, it is Heathcliff who breeds negative feelings towards the gentry and "utters a curse on the house", and not the other way around (Sinyard 56).

### 2.3. Heathcliff's Ability to Climb the Social Ladder

From the very beginning of the adaptation, it is suggested that Heathcliff is able to change his place in the social hierarchy if he invests enough effort. Thereby, Catherine accentuates that there are no constraints that prevent Heathcliff from leaving the Yorkshire Moors and alter his life. She blames his lack of money for his low status and wonders why Heathcliff does not run away from Wuthering Heights and returns when he is rich.

CATHERINE: Heathcliff, why don't you run away?

HEATHCLIFF: Run away? From you?

CATHERINE: You could come back rich and take me away. (00:23:16-00:23:22)

Catherine's prophecy about Heathcliff succeeding comes true, and he returns at Wuthering Heights as a well-off independent man. The film suggests that it is possible for Heathcliff to succeed in life, which is visible when he and Catherine talk on the veranda during the ball at Thrushcross Grange, and she suggests that it is obvious that Heathcliff has become a changed persona, that is a socialite:

CATHERINE: You're very grand, Heathcliff. So handsome. Looking at you tonight I could not help but remember how things used to be.

HEATHCLIFF: They used to be better.

CATHERINE: Don't pretend life hasn't improved for you. (01:14:55-00:15:07)

In the adaptation life has improved for Heathcliff and he has become a man equal to Catherine. This is so because the only thing that separates Heathcliff and Catherine in Wyler's adaptation is his lack of money which is the ultimatum that Catherine gives him in exchange for her love. The only thing that differentiates the man Catherine decides to marry, Edgar Linton, and Heathcliff is the incomparable difference in their financial status. Thus, when Heathcliff eventually gained money, he was considered a transformed man, which is visible in Edgar asking him: "What brought about this amazing transformation? Did you discover a gold mine in the New World...or perhaps you fell heir to a fortune?" (00:59:20-00:59:27). However, in the novel he is not doomed due to his poverty, but due to being a dark-skinned slave, and though both the novel and the adaptation imply that one's financial status is easily changeable, the novel proves that the hardships one's race bore were not.

Another element that is indicative of Heathcliff climbing the social ladder is the fact that he is treated as an utmost gentleman; thereby he is exempt from any potential insults directed towards him. In the novel, Heathcliff is judged on the basis of his race and his former slave status until the very end of his life. Thus, when he returned to the Yorkshire Moors after many years of absence and visited the Lintons, Edgar Linton “suggested the kitchen as a more suitable place for him” (Brontë 75). Edgar’s remark proves that from his point of view nothing has changed regarding Heathcliff, and that he is obliged to be segregated from the gentry as a former slave. However, the adaptation demonstrates the opposite by excluding disparagement and insults based on racial grounds, one’s former social status, and burdensome past. Thereby, when Heathcliff returns and visits Thrushcross Grange, Edgar encourages Catherine to accept the runaway guest and gives him a warm welcome:

CATHERINE: Go tell him I don’t wish to see him.

EDGAR: Oh, nonsense, Cathy. We can’t be as cruel as that. He’s come a long way, and he’s a fine gentleman, so Ellen says.

(. . .)

EDGAR: Come in. Sit by the fire. Have a whiskey?

HEATHCLIFF: No, thank you.

EDGAR: I’ve never seen such a change in a man. I wouldn’t have known you. You seem to have prospered since our last meeting. (00:57:11-00:58:59)

Not merely Heathcliff’s change is noticed and acknowledged, but he is treated as a member of the upper class. In Wyler's movie, Heathcliff is not referred to as a former servant or a slave, but he is the one who is being attended by the servants, which is visible in the scene of the ball at Thrushcross Grange, when “he hands his hat and cloak to the servants with barely a look at the underlinings in question” (Sinyard 58). Whereas in the novel he is treated as an eternal outcast, in the adaptation he is viewed and treated as a gentleman.

Whilst the novel implies that it is impossible for Heathcliff to truly change his low social standing, Wyler’s adaptation depicts the opposite. In the novel, following his return to Yorkshire Moors, Heathcliff is described as a “subdued” and “half-civilized ferocity”, whereas in the adaptation he is portrayed as an arrogant man who bears no traces of oppression and who “has

acquired the arrogance and self-confidence that go with his changed station in life” (Sinyard 58). Stam points out that “in the sound film, we do not only hear the words, with their accent and intonation, but we also witness the facial or corporeal expression that accompanies the words – the bodily postures of arrogance or resignation, the skeptically raised eyebrows, the look of distrust, the ironic glances – that modify the ostensible meaning” (10). It is precisely Heathcliff’s arrogance that implies that he is not a subdued boy, but a man standing very high on the social scale. “Heathcliff’s pinpricks of sarcasm” and “his sardonic tone” are directed towards the Lintons, and not the other way around (Sinyard 58). Thus, in Wyler’s adaptation Heathcliff is not being victimized by the Lintons when he returns, which implies that he is not considered to be inferior figure.

### 3. Kosminsky's Adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* (1992)

One of the most prominent adaptations of the renowned Victorian novel is the one from 1992 by the British director Peter Kosminsky. Elaine Martin claims that Kosminsky's adaptation differs from previous adaptations in its vivid portrayal of violence and brutality underlying the novel; the director eliminates the emotions from the film and focuses on sadism present in the novel, instead on the often depicted passion between the two lovers (683). Kosminsky's adaptation marks a step forward in tackling the issue of slavery in comparison to the older adaptations. The openness towards the issues of slavery in the British Empire, that is often kept a secret when it comes to adapting Brontë's novel, can be ascribed to the fact that the director is a Briton and has an innate fondness to his culture: "His 'abiding love of British culture' and passionate immersion in 'the period (and) the place,' guarantee his films' 'essential rightness' and 'fidelity'" (Sadoff 81). The fidelity to the novel is noticeable in the fidelity to the setting. The plot is set in the eighteenth century England, which was historically burdened by the slave trade, racial animosity, and rigid social stratification. The fact that the adaptation is intended to be faithful to the spirit of the novel is discernible in the title of the film itself: "Peter Kosminsky's title, *Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights* (1992), brands his film as genuine, as credits roll over shoots of a hooded female figure, 'Emily Brontë'" (Sadoff 81). One of the elements that further contribute to the faithfulness to the source text is the character of the novelist herself, who acquires the role of the narrator: "Her authorial voice-over repeatedly summarizes character motivations and explains cardinal functions; her presence implicitly claims the film is faithful to the writer's original novel" (Sadoff 81). By putting emphasis on the fidelity to the novel, the director does not hesitate to limn the scenes that might be considered controversial or polemical. He also sticks to the historical frame and context of the novel, without adorning the context.

The innovativeness of Kosminsky's work lies in the fact that he does not portray Heathcliff as a one-dimensional character. Sara Martin claims that the film's dutiful fidelity brings us back to the nineteenth century, when the novel was published, but it likewise "belongs firmly in the 1990s, when the figure of the villain was given new depths beyond the habitual stereotypes" (56). Hardly any of the former adaptations explore Heathcliff's personality of a sadist, but merely portray it as something that is intrinsically in his nature. However, Kosminsky tackles the duality of Heathcliff's character, and demonstrates that his persona of a tyrant stems from his long history as a victim and a slave: "Films of *Wuthering Heights* have had to confront the innate complexity of Heathcliff who is admittedly brutal, sadistic, and vengeful, but also tortured,

wronged, passionate, and a child of nature” (Elaine Martin 682). Thereby, Kosminsky’s adaptation is the first one to explore the historical background behind the novel and depict Heathcliff as a victim of the racist society. When it comes to portraying Heathcliff’s personality, Haire-Sargeant claims that “historically the films of *Wuthering Heights* have met this challenge in two ways: either by changing the story so that Heathcliff’s evil deeds are lessened or mitigated, or straight on, as Emily Brontë does, directing the reader/viewer to absorb the totality of Heathcliff’s evil and good within his human situation” (411). Kosminsky is one of the directors who approaches the story in its totality, and who makes the causal link between the character’s behavior and its life experiences transparent. For instance, most filmmakers are prone to depict Heathcliff as a Gothic, demonic, and villainous figure, while concurrently dodging to depict the violence he experienced, and which eventually led him to discard the personality of a tame and submissive boy and turn into a callous fiend. Most of the earlier filmmakers “seemed obliged to choose between either a victimized or an evil Heathcliff” (Elaine Martin 683), whereas Kosminsky shows all the richness and versatility of Heathcliff’s character, and thereby explores the topic of slavery and its effects on a person in its full extent.

One of the director’s distinctive features is that “unlike most of the directors who preceded him, Kosminsky includes the story of the second generation”, which has oftentimes been eliminated from the film adaptations (Elaine Martin 683). Thereby, he does not only portray Heathcliff, whose existence presents “a threat of contamination, which is conventionally assigned to Victorian blackness both in colonial locations and within Britain”, but also the son he had with the aristocrat Isabella Linton (Althubaiti 212). Heathcliff’s son Linton embodies the fear of racial mixing following the abolition of the slavery. The boy is the representation of a fulfilled prophecy of miscegenation and the embodiment of the horror that racial mixing denoted in the Victorian England: “The corruption attributed to hybridization in mid-century racist discourses is rendered in Linton Heathcliff. He manifests most of the worst accidents and mistakes mixed blood could represent for mid-century England: disease, viciousness, treason, cowardice, duplicity, unmerited power, shiftlessness” (Von Sneidern 184). In encompassing the other half of the novel into the adaptation, there is a visible effort “to break away from the partial, sentimental readings of the novel”, and focus on the social, political, cultural, and historical stratification of the novel instead on the love story (Sara Martin 56).



### 3.1. Heathcliff's Background and Past

Kosminsky's adaptation undoubtedly marks a shift in the explicit depiction of the social issues that Brontë implicitly critiqued, and Heathcliff is depicted in accordance to that. When Heathcliff comes to the home of the Earnshaws, he is portrayed as a nameless boy with no identity, with no memory of his family, and with no sense of his past:

NELLY DEAN: Hasn't he got any family of his own?

MR. EARNSHAW: He's part of our family now. (00:09:43-00:09:50)

Heathcliff's lack of sense of his own identity indicates his tormented past as a slave: "many slaves had experienced a sequence or fractures in their personal lives, having been wrested often from families" and "sold usually as individuals" (Morgan 96). Though Heathcliff is often characterized as an orphan due to being homeless and parentless, the fact that the boy is nameless further signifies that he is not merely an orphan, but a slave. Moreover, the fact that he carries only a first name, without a surname throughout the entire film, testifies that he is not a member of the Earnshaw family, and reinforces his identity as a slave. He is portrayed as "someone who possesses nothing as a servant or black gipsy and is not even given a last or family name" (Althubaiti 218).

Kosminsky focuses on achieving congruency between the visual and the verbal part of the adaptation, which contributes to the effect of reliability and trustworthiness. "In the move from telling to showing, a performance adaptation must dramatize: description, narration, and represented thoughts must be transcoded into speech, actions, sounds, and visual images" (Hutcheon 40). Thereby Heathcliff's declared background and the accompanying physical characterization should be visible in the physical features of the actor as well. Whereas in numerous adaptations Heathcliff is only said to have dark skin, while the actor's features showed the contrary, Kosminsky goes a step further. In the adaptation Heathcliff is claimed to be of Romani descent, namely he has been addressed as a 'gypsy', a racial slur that has been used throughout the adaptation by the white-skinned characters. Although in his adaptation Heathcliff is embodied by a Caucasian actor Ralph Fiennes, there is a discernible effort in making him look like he is a person of color and visualizing his racial otherness. The design team tried to portray him as a racial other and make his physical appearance visibly different from the appearance of the other actors, who are fair-skinned. "In Kosminsky's film" there can be noticed "the decision to make Fiennes appear deeply tanned, with his light chestnut hair dyed black" (Sara Martin 64).

Though the director did not cast a dark-skinned actor, his decision in this way acknowledges that Heathcliff's skin color carries great importance. The fact that Heathcliff's darkness does not refer to his uncleanness, as in Wyler's adaptation, is not merely recognition of Heathcliff's identity, but recognition of the burdened life Heathcliff had to suffer in a racist society due to his skin color. Though the progress was made in the sense of reconciling the verbal and the visual part of the film and making Heathcliff look dark-skinned, the real social progress and emancipation comes with Andrea Arnold's adaptation, who is the first director to cast a dark-skinned actor for the role of Heathcliff.

As well as in the novel, Heathcliff is characterized as a "starving slave whose owner may have lost or abandoned him" (Althubaiti 205). The dark-skinned boy is said to be found "starving in the streets of Liverpool", the most infamous slave port involved in British transatlantic slave trade during the eighteenth century (00:09:32-00:09:34). The first thing that is indicative of his slave past and foreignness is his lack of English language knowledge. He is not familiar with the language that the other characters are speaking, thus in the part of the film that depicts his childhood, Heathcliff always stays mute. However, he starts speaking English when he is a grown up, which shows that after a certain time of exposure to the English language, he learned to fluently speak it. Heathcliff's silence and reticence is not merely a sign of his foreignness, but a sign of his distrust in people and a tormented past. The narrator, which is the ghost of Emily Brontë, states: "Cathy was drawn to the silent, self-possessed boy. But it was hardness, not gentleness that kept him silent" (00:10:23-00:10:35). By claiming that it was hardness that made him silent, the narrator indicates that he had been exposed to brutal treatment. There's a parallel between Heathcliff's description in the film and in the novel, where the narrator, Nelly Dean, describes Heathcliff as a calm boy, whose poised appearance and manner reveal that he was exposed to brutality: "He seemed a sullen, patient child, hardened, perhaps, to ill-treatment" (Brontë 30). Furthermore, Heathcliff is portrayed as a boy who is not acquainted with the customs and the culture in which he found himself to be. Not merely does he not know the language when he comes to Wuthering Heights, but he is also not familiar with the nonverbal communication of the Earnshaws. Hutcheon claims that "language is not the only way to express meaning"; according to her "visual and gestural representations are rich in complex associations" as well (23). When Mr. Earnshaw introduces Heathcliff to Catherine, he tells him to shake hands with her the way he taught him: "Offer your hand as I showed you" (00:09:58-00:10:00). Heathcliff's gestures reveal that he was not exposed to European culture and civilization before, thus when Mr. Earnshaw introduces him to his children he does not know how to react properly.

### 3.2. Heathcliff's Social Status

Though Heathcliff is not embodied by a dark-skinned actor, the hardships that he experiences due to the color of his skin and the inferiority ascribed to him from his very arrival at Wuthering Heights are indicated by various cinematic techniques. In the scene where Mr. Earnshaw introduces Heathcliff to his children, he claims that the boy has to be treated like a part of the family: “You’re to treat him as your new brother” (00:09:39-00:09:41). However, the director’s choice of the angle of the shots in the scene announces that the boy is not going to be considered nor treated as an equal. The director does not opt for eye-level shots which would signal the equality of the character; quite the contrary, he uses a combination of low-angle and high-angle shots to accentuate the contrast in the status of the characters. Thus, when Heathcliff is displayed, a high-angle shot is used in order to signalize his inferiority: “This type of shot tends to diminish a subject, making it look intimidated or threatened” (Mamer 8). Accordingly, the director uses a low-angle shot to show the Earnshaws, because this angle of the shot “has tendency to make characters or environment look threatening, powerful or intimidating” (Mamer 7). The dynamic exchange between the high-angle and the long-angle shots announces a long period of tyranny over the powerless boy.

The adaptation graphically shows the humiliating treatment that Heathcliff experiences in Wuthering Heights and “an age-long racial degradation of him as a black man and servant”, which includes verbal as well as physical violence (Althubaiti 214). Heathcliff is victimized from the beginning of his residence in Wuthering Heights, which is shown in the racist discourse used by the white characters to address him: “Heathcliff, the ‘gipsy boy’, is constructed in a subtly racist discourse as belonging to a filthy, wild-looking and dreadfully primitive class” (Althubaiti 204). Thus, in the scene where Mr. Earnshaw first introduces the family with the boy, Hindley states: “But he’s a filthy gypsy, father” (00:09:35-00:09:37). Kosminsky unmasks the animosity bred towards the racially other Heathcliff and reveals that indeed “his dark skin, eyes and hair mark him as an outsider” in a mainly-white European racist society (Sara Martin 57). He is prone to addressing and revealing the prejudices that were present in the white racist culture about the black races, which is visible in Heathcliff being called various derogatory names. Thereby, Joseph calls Heathcliff “a young devil of a gypsy” (00:35:54-00:35:56), which shows that racial others are stigmatized and considered to be inherently evil diabolic figures. His entire life he continues to be socially degraded and denounced “as villain, demon, and nameless black man” (Althubaiti 206). Kosminsky does not only depict verbal violence and insults based on the racial grounds, but he also vividly depicts the physical violence Heathcliff experiences.

Thus in the scene following Heathcliff's arrival at Wuthering Heights, the first interaction between Heathcliff and his new brother Hindley includes severe physical abuse (00:10:39-00:10:47). In this scene, the cinematic techniques have a great importance in accentuating the message the director wants to convey. Kosminsky uses a low-angle shot to accentuate Hindley's dominance as opposed to Heathcliff's inferiority and powerlessness.

Heathcliff is constructed as a figure ostracized by and from the rest of the family: "Heathcliff, the outsider, the 'slave', is excluded as someone who has no social or biological place in the existing social structure" (Althubaiti 222). Members of the Earnshaw family insist on his segregation, especially after the death of Mr. Earnshaw. Hindley considers him unsuitable to share the home with the Earnshaw family, thus the place of his residence becomes the stable, which he needs to share with the animals: "Your quarters are in the stables from now on" (00:11:34-00:11:38). Again, the director uses a low-angle shot to further emphasize Heathcliff's helplessness versus the power that Hindley has over him. Moreover, even Catherine claims that Heathcliff's place is not in the house with the rest of the family, but in the fields working: "Shouldn't you be back in the fields?" (00:28:54-00:28:56). He is considered to be inferior, which results in him being "racially and socially displaced and exiled (. . .) by the white and rich class" (Althubaiti 218). Finally, Heathcliff's low social status becomes discernible in the scene which presents the ball organized by the Earnshaws, namely when Heathcliff visits the ball neatly dressed and combed, which provokes anger in Hindley:

HINDLEY: Get that gypsy out here! You're not...

CATHERINE: Stop it!

HINDLEY: fit...for a civilized house! (00:25:05-00:25:22)

This scene shows how "Heathcliff is again racially and ethnically excluded as a black man" (Althubaiti 219). Not merely does Hindley insult him on the racial grounds, and implies that he is uncivilized beast, but he also beats him severely. The mere sight of Heathcliff is enough to provoke anger in Hindley, and though Hindley suggests that Heathcliff's level of civilization is not sufficient to be in their company, it is he who acts uncivilized and savagely. This scene, among many others, shows the paradox that was present in the white culture for a long time, according to which the black races were accused of their uncouthness and barbarism, whereas in fact it was the Caucasians who acted abusive and violent. Derogatory prejudices about the non-white races are just a part of the racial intolerance and the violence Kosminsky addresses.

### 3.3. Heathcliff's Ability to Climb the Social Ladder

Kosminsky limns the impossibility of a black man and a former servant to cast off the labels that the society ascribed to him. Heathcliff is therefore stigmatized as an inferior and an uncivilized figure even when he becomes a gentleman. All the stereotypes imposed upon him as a servant are still used against him even after his return as a successful and independent man. When Heathcliff returns, Catherine's excitement is interrupted by Edgar's scorn. Edgar treats him infernally even after his return and refers to him as a "runaway servant":

CATHERINE: I know you didn't like him, but, for my sake, you must be friends now. Shall I tell him to come up? Come on.

EDGAR: (. . .) Catherine, try to be glad without being absurd in front of the whole household. Heathcliff is a runaway servant. (00:40:52-00:41:12)

Until the end of the film he does not acquire the respect he deserves, but his relationship with the Earnshaws and the Lintons is characterized by his degradation of him as an inferior man. Thus, when Isabella claims that she loves Heathcliff, Catherine still defines him as untamed, unrefined, and uncouth man, despite his obvious change. She considers that no change is enough for Heathcliff to be viewed as anything but a beast: "He's an unreclaimed creature. He's a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man" (00:46:55-00:47:00). He is still belittled and viewed as a man unworthy of the white characters' company, love, and respect. This becomes further noticeable in the scene when the late Catherine's daughter Cathy tells Heathcliff that Edgar, her father, does not like him, and he replies: "I imagine he thought me unworthy to marry his sister" (00:09:58:00:10:01). His every relationship "is problematised by the fact that his colouring is quite different from that of those around him" (Sara Martin 57). Despite his newly acquired wealth, Heathcliff cannot change his place in the social hierarchy and start being viewed as a man equal to the Caucasians.

In Brontë's novel, the topic of miscegenation has great importance, as it was considered to be a major social issue during the Victorian Era. The author opts for the Gothic as a genre which truly mirrors all the anxieties and the fears of her time, because "this racial tension, this fear of miscegenation and interracial desire, has been an element of the Gothic since the earliest days of the genre" (Hogle 241). However, whilst other filmmakers avoided the topic due to its delicateness, Kosminsky includes the story of the second generation in his adaptation. He portrays Heathcliff's son Linton as a feeble, weak, and pale creature, whose appearance symbolizes the prevalent skepticism towards miscegenation: "With Heathcliff, Emily Brontë

critiqued racist presuppositions about Anglo-Saxon superiority; but with Linton she reimposes the taboo against miscegenation” (Von Sneidern 186). However, the death of Heathcliff’s and Isabella’s half-noble son leaves Heathcliff without an heir. Thereby Hindley’s prophecy following Heathcliff’s arrival at Yorkshire Moors came true: “Nothing here belongs to you - not now, not ever” (00:10:42-00:10:48). And indeed nothing eventually did belong to Heathcliff because both he and his heir died. Whereas the legacy of the aristocratic Lintons and the Earnshaws continued through their offspring, every trace of Heathcliff was gone and forgotten. Von Sneidern emphasizes that Linton’s death was a decisive and symbolic action with a deep meaning: “The stain of Heathcliff’s blood will not smudge any little faces in the local region nor spread generation after generation until the entire population is infected. The Heights and its environment will revert to Anglo-Saxon racial purity” (Von Sneidern 186). Such attitude towards Heathcliff’s and Linton’s racial otherness symbolizes the fact that, during the entire eighteenth century no progress was made when it comes to the issue of racial equality.

Following his return to Yorkshire Moors, Heathcliff is depicted “as savage, lunatic, violent, subversive, and uncouth” (Eagleton 125), all being stereotypes about the people of color during the time in which the plot is set, that is the late eighteenth and the very first year of the nineteenth century. Kosminsky shows that whilst Heathcliff is unable to truly change the society’s perception of him as a black man and acquire the social status he longed for, he compensates this inability with a keen desire to exact revenge on his oppressors’ children: “My old enemies have not beaten me. Now would be the precise time to revenge myself on their children” (01:34:57-01:35:03). Heathcliff decides to treat the children of his oppressors in the same inhumane way he was treated as a child in Wuthering Heights. He makes Hareton his slave in order to see if the boy will turn out the way he did when subjected to inhumane treatment: “Now, my bonnie lad, you’re mine. Let’s see if one tree won’t grow as crooked as another with the same wind to twist it” (01:06:53-01:07:02). Kosminsky tries to transfer on screen the submissiveness, obedience, and loyalty slaves have towards their oppressors. In the novel, Heathcliff claims that “the tyrant grinds down his slaves and they don’t turn against him, they crush those beneath them” (Bronte 88), and applies this pattern of behavior on Hareton. When Catherine reproaches Hareton about not opposing to Heathcliff’s tyranny, Hareton answers: “If he were the devil himself, it wouldn’t matter” (01:34:33-01:34:36). Thereby, Kosminsky does not only show that Hareton is portrayed as a slave, but that Heathcliff remains a slave his entire life because he willingly did not turn against his tyrants, even when he had the chance. Thereby it is shown that even Heathcliff adopted the image of himself as a man inferior to those around him.

#### 4. Arnold's Adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*

Despite the fact that numerous filmmakers decided to attempt to adapt Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights*, there are few of them who thoroughly explore the social, political, cultural, and historical complexity of the novel in their adaptations, and who go beyond exploring a theme of tragic love. In the multitude of adaptations of Brontë's novel, the one by the British director Andrea Arnold stands out as the first one which explicitly portrays the social issues underlying the novel. Arnold's adaptation addresses the omnipresent problem of the oppression of non-white people in the predominantly white European culture, and suggests that "the time is clearly right (. . .) for adaptations of works on the timely topic of race" (Hutcheon 143). Her adaptation reflects the emerging tendency of the twenty first century adaptations to speak out about social problems and injustice. The adaptation was released in 2011, three months following the London Riots, which were triggered by a violent act of police officers who shot and killed a non-white young man. Due to the fact that the adaptation was released shortly after the London Riots in 2011, it sparked controversy and came across criticism: Murray claims that the explicitness of the portrayal of racial tension in Arnold's adaptation "attracted repeated critical comment (. . .) at the time of the film's release only a few months after the August 2011 London Riots" (8). The socio-political atmosphere in which the film was released proves that the themes addressed in Arnold's film are still of great importance for the contemporary society, which incessantly struggles with the issue of racial animosity and violence.

Althubaiti claims that with her novel, "Emily Brontë is making a serious and implicit critique of British slavery and British imperialism not only at home but abroad and throughout the colonies" (202). However, Arnold's adaptation is characterized by a greater degree of explicitness in addressing social issues that were for a long time considered to be taboo. In her adaptation, Andrea Arnold portrayed the historical reality of the oppressive British Empire by openly addressing the issue of slavery underlying Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights*, and thereby made her adaptation a postcolonial critique of slavery and white privilege. With her adaptation of Brontë's novel, Arnold proved that "an adaptation can obviously be used to engage in a larger social or cultural critique", whilst multiple previous adaptations of the same novel proved that "it can be even used to avoid it" (Hutcheon 94). What is more, Colón Semenza and Hasenfratz even claim that Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* can be considered "a revision and a critique of the Victorian parlor-room film versions which came before it – especially Wyler's film" (375). Her adaptation differs from the other adaptations of the same novel in the openness towards depicting the issue of slavery. In her film, Heathcliff's identity as a slave is not shrouded

in mystery and the consequences that slavery has on an individual are not embellished. Unlike the previous adapters of this novel, Arnold does not bypass the question of racial oppression and exploitation, which burdened the British Empire for a long time and which even the author of the novel herself hesitated to explicitly state. Due to straightforwardness in reviving the potentially controversial racist imagery from the novel, her film becomes an even more faithful testimony of slavery and brutal treatment of non-Europeans in the eighteenth century than the novel itself.

The plot of the adaptation is set in the growing British Empire of the eighteenth century, when the slave trade was flourishing in the British Empire. Not merely “Arnold’s adaptation is set in the late 1700s”, but it is “filmed on location in North Yorkshire”, which contributes to the faithfulness to the setting of the novel (Colón Semenza and Hasenfratz 375). However, Brontë and Arnold considerably differ in their depiction of the racial others. Brontë in her novel used Gothic imagery to represent the skepticism and the anxiety of the white population of the British Empire which was caused by the slave trade and the newly-emerged possibility of the whites coming into contact with the racial others. Hogle claims that the Gothic frequently turned the racial other “into the obscene cannibalistic personification of evil, through whom authors could bring revulsion and horror into the text, thereby mirroring political and social anxieties close to home” (231). However, Arnold did not depict the protagonist as a demonic Gothic villain, but as a victim of the colonialism, imperialism, Eurocentrism, and the slave trade: “Arnold’s decision in this regard acknowledges the long-term historical persistence of racist and colonialist discourses and practices within British society” (Murray 8).

Arnold proves herself to be a pioneer when adapting the distinguished Victorian novel by Brontë because her adaptation stands out as “the first adaptation of the novel to feature a dark-skinned actor” (Colón Semenza and Hasenfratz 375). Arnold uses the character of Heathcliff as a symbol of the slave trade prevalent in the eighteenth century British Empire and the racism prevalent in the Victorian Era after its abolition. He is also used as a symbol of the maltreated non-white people in nowadays society which still has not rid of its racist and bigoted tendencies and behavior. Although the adaptation revives some of the violent images from the novel, the director also inserts new powerful images to emphasize her stance that *Wuthering Heights* is a novel which, beside its romantic content, gives us the insight into the political and social issues of the era.



#### 4.1. Heathcliff's Background and Past

Unlike the previous adapters of Brontë's novel, Arnold does not focus solely on the verbal aspect when communicating a message to the viewer. Quite the contrary, she puts the most emphasis on the visual images, which is mostly visible in her delineation of Heathcliff's ethnicity, race, and background. She combines all the visual elements to make the adaptation credible and present Heathcliff as "an abandoned or escaped African slave" (Murray 8). Thereby, in her adaptation Mr. Earnshaw does not claim that he found him "in the streets of Liverpool" (Brontë 29), the main British slave port at the time, which is the case in all the previously analyzed adaptations. When he introduces the boy to his family, he merely claims "I found him in street" (00:03:54-00:03:56), whilst the visual images that follow illustrate that the boy undoubtedly has a slave past.

In Brontë's novel, it becomes apparent that the hardships Heathcliff experiences stem from his racial otherness, whilst the specification of Heathcliff's race does not go further than the mere description that the boy is "as dark almost as if it came from the devil" (Brontë 29). The controversy concerning Heathcliff's race becomes more prominent with the advent of multiple adaptations of the novel, when it becomes evident that the directors' deliberately avoided casting people of color for the role of the dark-skinned oppressed boy. However, Andrea Arnold marks a turning point in adapting the Victorian novel and stands out as the first director to cast a person of color to embody the character of Heathcliff. Although "cinematic production necessitates a selection of actors, and a casting process that inevitably locates face and body in concepts of gender and race", many of the previous adapters neglected this fact by opting for a Caucasian actor (Stam and Raengo 37). The protagonist's racial otherness in the eighteenth century British Empire signifies that the boy originates from a distant country polluted by the British colonial and slave trade tendencies. The director's decision to cast two actors of Afro-Caribbean descent for the role of Heathcliff, Solomon Glave and James Howson, is not only indicative of Heathcliff's descent, but it also symbolizes all the accompanying difficulties of the non-white people in the British Empire (Murray 8).

Arnold accentuates her stance that *Wuthering Heights* is a novel about slavery by inserting a powerful visual motif of whipping marks on Heathcliff's back in her adaptation, which is visible in the scene where Nelly washes the newcomer. One shot in the scene is accompanied by the extreme close-up of his back, in which the displayed scars cast away any doubts regarding his identity (00:05:23-00:05:26). Arnold is known for using natural lighting in her films and proves

herself an auteur by “using only candlelight” and fireplace “as illumination” in this scene (Murray 16). Such lighting has a deeper meaning because the shadows on Heathcliff’s back indicate the mysteriousness of his past, while the glimpse at the whipping marks concurrently reveals it. The whipping marks on Heathcliff’s back unambiguously establish his identity as a slave and suggest that, in the hands of their owners, “slaves were subject to virtually whatever discipline and punishments their masters chose to enforce” (Marshall 281).

Moreover, Arnold uses extreme close-up to present branded initials on Heathcliff’s shoulder, which symbolize the indelible relationship between a slave and his master (00:05:28-00:05:32). Branded initials represent the means of dehumanizing slaves and making them permanent property of their masters because “slaves were branded with the marks of their owners” (Marshall 281). In this shot Arnold controls the natural light and shadows in a way which is similar to the side-lighting, hence the side of Heathcliff’s shoulder with the branded initials is darker. Such lighting suggests that the slave trade is the secret which has always been hidden in the context of this novel and its previous adaptations. Although Nelly in the novel states that Heathcliff may be of noble birth, “kidnapped by wicked sailors, and brought to England”, Arnold uses the branded initials to solve the mystery of his descent and accentuate that he was “brought to England” by “wicked” slave traders (Brontë 45).

Finally, Heathcliff’s means of communication suggests that “he is a product of a thriving Liverpool slave trade” (Von Sneidern 175), sold by slave traders and brought to England by a slave ship from a faraway country. In the novel, the language the boy speaks is defined as “some gibberish that nobody could understand” which makes everyone feel “frightened” (Brontë 29). Arnold portrays similar image, but with the intention to convey the message that Heathcliff comes from the culture considerably different from the British. In the film, Heathcliff speaks only when he curses and his facial expressions represent his means of communication, like growling at the dog when he feels threatened (00:03:35-00:03:45). Hutcheon claims that “facial expressions” as well as “gestures” also “convey cultural information” (150). In Arnold’s film, his facial expressions, which suggest defensiveness, are ascribed to the need to protect himself due to the former exposure to the violence.

## 4.2. Heathcliff's Social Status

The director identifies Heathcliff's social status with that of a slave in every aspect, the fact which becomes evident by observing the distribution of the roles within the home of the Earnshaws. Very soon after his arrival it becomes visible that Heathcliff is not considered equal to the white characters surrounding him, which results with the boy acquiring the role of a slave and the Earnshaws establishing themselves as the planters. The film is “intrinsically connected to the exploration of the tensions and perversions of the political, economic, physical, and psychological bond between master and slave” (Hogle, 234). The relationship between the Earnshaws and Heathcliff is based on the relentless exploitation of the boy, who becomes a mere labor force on their farm. This is vividly depicted in the scene where Heathcliff and other men are working on the land, the scene which evokes the image of the slaves working on the plantation (00:56:36-00:57:14). This image is further accentuated by the director's decision to insert diegetic sound in the form of a song, sang in unison by the workers, which paints a picture of the slaves singing spirituals. Arnold's adaptation, as well as Brontë's novel, presents “a strongly allegorized view of the rural families who formed the hinterland of Liverpool and Lancaster slave trading”, and the Earnshaws symbolize one of those rural families (Heywood 198).

Arnold is very explicit in portraying violence typical for the slave owners and the suffering typical for the slaves. She refuses to deprive the film of the controversial situations to make it more acceptable, hence her adaptation is the first one to depict Catherine spitting on Heathcliff (00:04:20-00:04:27), the “behaviour compatible with a vulgar planter rather than a civilized society” (Von Sneidern 175). All of the directors in their adaptations avoided depicting this scene and deliberately changed the content of the novel that could bear any racist connotations. Unlike them, Arnold shows fidelity in displaying the racial discrimination and openly criticizes such tendencies. Arnold depicts the physical abuse slaves had to face with in the scene where Hindley savagely beats up Heathcliff (00:53:53-00:54:15). Hindley's brutal act is a response to Heathcliff throwing food in Edgar Linton's face after being mocked and insulted by the young aristocrat. Heathcliff's act of standing up for himself is interpreted as an upheaval against the aristocracy and a sign of disrespect towards his owners, and is punished as such. In the scene which depicts Heathcliff being beaten, the director uses a low-angle shot to accentuate Hindley's dominance as opposed to Heathcliff's inferiority and powerlessness (00:54:12-00:54:17). The director uses a tracking shot in the same scene; the camera follows Heathcliff's motion while being brutally beaten, allowing viewers to experience the suffering and sympathize with the

protagonist (00:54:09-00:54:12). Lastly, the visual motif of “flogging”, which symbolizes the means of punishing slaves for their disobedience, is not neglected in the film (Brontë 36). Arnold depicts the violent scene where Hindley commands Joseph to whip Heathcliff because he stopped working, in which Joseph tells him: “Even the animals work round here. You’re here to work” (00:37:45-00:38:20). The whip is a symbolic prop because it is the object used to punish both animals and the slaves. The growing number of whipping marks on Heathcliff’s back symbolizes “the full horror of slavery’s dissolution of the boundary between human and animal” (Hogle 183). This proves that for a long time in our history the black people were degraded and viewed only as a labor force.

The director shows that Heathcliff’s low social status in the eighteenth century British Empire originates from the unfounded, yet generally accepted, stereotypes about the black races, which are expressed by means of derogatory language. The stereotypes and the accompanying derogatory terms are “employed to belittle, demean, and insult black people on the basis of their race” (Sani 332). The first stereotype consists in black people being categorized as a threat to the white population due to their skin color, when in fact it is the opposite. This is visible in the scene which depicts Catherine being attacked by a dog whilst spying at the Lintons with Heathcliff. Based solely on their appearance, Catherine is called “a lass”, and Heathcliff “a right out-and-outer”, the term which is employed to describe “a total scoundrel, one who lives by out-and-out lies” (Brontë 39). The insult directed towards the black boy is accompanied by a racist remark by Mr. Linton: “We should hang you now boy, before you get any older. Do the county a favour” (00:43:30-00:43:33). He thereby alludes that he should be hanged, because his race presents a threat to the existence of the white society. Arnold interpreted this sentence as a racist remark and as an allusion to the lynching of the non-white people who are assessed as a threat to the white population of the Yorkshire Moors. Therefore, she openly addresses the fact “that Heathcliff is hated for his negro-looking features”, and that the poor treatment he unduly receives in the eighteenth century British Empire stems solely from his racial otherness (Althubaiti 208). Moreover, the film vividly depicts stereotypes connected to the people of color, which mainly consist in identifying them with animals. Stereotypes about the black people are expressed in the derogatory language which differs in the novel and the adaptation. Thus in the novel Edgar compares Heathcliff’s black curly hair with “a colt’s mane” (Brontë 46), whilst in the adaptation, after Heathcliff has been dressed in nice clothes, Edgar makes a remark that “he looks like a circus monkey” (00:53:45-00:53:48). The director intentionally employed this comparison because it bears stereotypical connotations: “the terms ape, monkey, baboon or other

names for members of the primate family are commonly used to refer to black persons in many white racist societies” (Sani 332). Arnold does not censor the racial slurs, which contributes to the faithful portrayal of racial intolerance. The final stereotype consists in characterizing the black race as intrinsically inferior to the white race. According to such stereotype, a black man can only be a part of the white community “when in his natural subordination to the European”, never as an equal to a white man (Hunt xvi). Arnold’s adaptation graphically portrays the ostracism and the social excommunication people of color experience in a society contaminated by racial hatred, which is shown in Hindley’s refusal to accept the parentless boy Heathcliff as his new brother, though his father asks him to: “He’s not my brother, he’s a nigger” (00:21:51-00:21:53). This claim reinforces the belief that, due to his racial otherness, a non-white boy does not deserve a place within a white family nor within a society in general, unless he is subordinated to a white man. The marginalization black people suffer is the most visible in Hindley’s employment of the word “nigger”, derogatory term which is commonly employed in the film with the purpose to show the humiliation black people suffered in a predominantly white society.

### 4.3. Heathcliff's Ability to Climb the Social Ladder

Both Brontë and Arnold emphasize that Heathcliff can change his appearance, clothes, and financial status, but he cannot change the society's perception of him because he is a black man in the eighteenth century British Empire, which means that despite his newly gained wealth, he cannot bridge the gap between him, the Earnshaws and the Lintons. Even after his transformation, Heathcliff is still described in the novel as "a half-civilized ferocity", implying he can never be fully-civilized due to his race (Brontë 75). The description of Heathcliff as a partly civilized man following his return as a changed man is compliant with the Victorian stereotype that "Negroes are a different species from the white man" (Hunt xvii), and as such can "can only be humanized and civilized by Europeans" (Hunt xvi). Therefore, black people were placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy, because the top of the social hierarchy was considered to be destined for the white man. Arnold shows innovativeness when expressing Heathcliff's inability to climb the social ladder, and avoids using the already established terms to describe Heathcliff's inferiority previously used in the novel and other adaptations. This is visible in the final scene of the film, where the director inserts non-diegetic sound, a soundtrack by Mumford & Sons called *The Enemy*: "Film directing consists in contextualizing the words not only through performance and *mise-en-scène*, but also through the other tracks (music, noise, written materials)" (Stam 19). The title of the soundtrack is greatly symbolic of Heathcliff from the standpoint of the white characters. His presence represents a threat to the white society, and as such he is labeled as an enemy from the beginning up to the end of the film. His racial otherness is observed as a possibility of contaminating the racially pure white society.

The verses "But I came and I was nothing/and time will give us nothing" from the soundtrack are used metaphorically to accentuate Heathcliff's helplessness in the era of oppression of non-white people. The soundtrack accentuates the fact that, in his case, time did not change anything; the perception that society had about him as a black man remained unaltered. The verses highlight the fact that time can change someone's financial status, but not one's race, which was an important indicator of one's worth in the eighteenth century England. They emphasize that all of his attempts to change himself and escape the burden of being dark-skinned are futile because he cannot change his skin color, which makes him "nothing" in the British Empire. In the soundtrack, the pronoun "nothing" is used as means of censorship for derogatory words frequently employed to insult the black race, which can be identified with the pronoun "nowt" used in the novel: "The general failure to understand one another is frequently and simply

revealed by means of what might be called the “nowt” - device of perceptual censorship” (Sonstroem 51).

The verses “So why did you choose to lean on/a man you knew was falling” highlight the fact that despite his success, Heathcliff refers to himself as a fallen man. They indicate that Heathcliff’s life was doomed from the very beginning due to the color of his skin, and thereby his and Catherine’s love had no future. Sara Martin claims that “Heathcliff’s physical appearance is crucial in understanding (. . .) his troubled relationship with Cathy” (57). This soundtrack, as well as the film in its entirety, can be described as an account of former slave’s life who could not escape the burden of a dark-skinned man in the eighteenth century despite his efforts.

## 5. Conclusion

Though William Wyler's *Wuthering Heights* (1939), Peter Kosminsky's *Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights* (1992), and Andrea Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* (2011) rely on the same source text, the novel *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, they considerably differ in the topics they address from the novel and in the way they portray these topics. The analysis of Heathcliff's background, social status, and his ability to climb the social ladder demonstrates the fact that contemporary adaptations are more prone to tackle sensitive topics like race, slavery, racial intolerance, and social injustice, which were for a long time considered to be taboo, whereas the older ones avoid them. This can be ascribed to the differences in the socio-political climate of the adapters' time, which considerably conditioned the way in which the adaptations were made. Due to the socio-political turmoil of William Wyler's time, there can be noticed the reluctance to tackle polemical social, political, cultural, and historical topics in his adaptation. The fact that his adaptation was released at the very outset of the Second World War, resulted with the adaptation becoming a story about tragic love, whilst the timely issues of slavery, dehumanization, and race were omitted. On the other hand, a more suitable historical moment allowed Peter Kosminsky to criticize the violence and the racial hatred people of color experienced in his adaptation. The absence of controversial political events of Kosminsky's time gave the director enough freedom to express his disapproval of the ill treatment non-white races received throughout history. He portrays Heathcliff as a person of color, and connects his racial otherness with the verbal and physical abuse he suffers. Kosminsky thereby marks a shift in addressing the fact that there is more to *Wuthering Heights* than just a love story, the fact which especially comes to the fore in Andrea Arnold's adaptation. Arnold's adaptation differs from the previous adaptations of the same novel in the director's decision to cast a person of color for the role of the racially other Heathcliff. Her adaptation explicitly addresses the fact that, for a long time in history, racial otherness, low social status, and subordination were interdependent and closely related. Arnold did not hesitate to depict the slave-holding, racist, and violent tendencies of the eighteenth century British Empire, which is apparent in her decision to extend her adaptation into a postcolonial critique of slavery and white privilege. Altogether, the analysis of the three adaptations leads to the conclusion that, historically, every adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* has great importance, because the adapters' different approaches in tackling the issues of slavery, dehumanization, and racism reveal the society's attitude towards these issues, as well as the fact if these issues were present in the society at the time the adaptation was made.



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