

## The Myth Re-Enacted: Sisyphus and Heathcliff

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### Abstract

In the classical period of literature, Greek mythology inspired the ancient Greek dramatists to use these myths for their plays, especially the tragedies. This gave a ready context and served to preserve the values of the culture. Over the centuries, many writers have used Greek myths in their writings directly or indirectly. The purpose may be to highlight their characters and themes so as to universalize them.

The Greek myth of Sisyphus has captured the imagination of many writers, including Albert Camus who uses this myth as a title to his existentialist thought. The story of Sisyphus is well known. The gods punish Sisyphus, everlastingly, by ordering him to push a heavy boulder uphill; as soon as he reaches the top, the boulder rolls downhill. This pattern is to be repeated for eternity and the entire effort is rendered futile.

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* has as its center, the larger-than-life personality of Heathcliff. He is the protagonist and antagonist combined in one; and he bears a strong affinity to the mythical figure of Sisyphus. Heathcliff desires revenge against all those who ill-treated him; and he achieves this, only to find that his entire effort has gone waste. Heathcliff's character also bears resemblance to Sisyphus, as his qualities of endurance and determination are the foundation of his power too.

Through this recasting of the figure of Sisyphus, Emily Brontë weaves a new personal myth and creates Heathcliff as a unique protagonist - the anti-hero.

**Keywords:** Myth, Sisyphus, futility, endurance, anti-hero

### 1. Introduction

Greek mythology has captivated minds not only in the classical times, where well known myths were the themes for ancient tragedies; but down the centuries also. Writers in later time periods have often used these myths to reinforce their characters and to give a wider context to their ideas in order to universalize their point of view.

The Greek myth of Sisyphus or Sisyphos is well known and though different versions exist, the basic story is that Sisyphus, founder and first king of Corinth, was a trickster who twice dared to cheat death. The first time, when Thanatos came to take Sisyphus to Hades, the latter tied up the god. The second time, he was taken to Hades but convinced the gods that since his wife had not followed the rituals and not given him a proper burial so he had to go back to rectify it and punish her. He returned to his life but never went back to the underworld and lived to a ripe old age. When, at the third time, Sisyphus was summoned by death, Zeus personally accompanied him to Hades, to prevent him from tricking Death again. Zeus finally punished Sisyphus by ordering him to perpetually roll a big boulder to the top of the hill, which nearing the summit, rolled down to the

bottom; and the process was to be repeated eternally. The terrible punishment was in keeping with the enormity of the deed of defying the gods and the natural order of things; the gods set him up as a moral lesson for humanity.

Sisyphus did possess a wicked intelligence and Homer, in *The Iliad*, speaks of him as “a man as crafty as they come” (Homer, 2003, p.103) In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus sees Sisyphus in Hades and remarks:

Then I witnessed the torture of Sisyphus, as he wrestled with a huge rock with both hands. Bracing himself and thrusting with hands and feet he pushed the boulder uphill to the top. But every time, as he was about to send it toppling over the crest, its sheer weight turned it back, and once again towards the plain the pitiless rock rolled down. So once more he had to wrestle with the thing and push it up, while the sweat poured from his limbs and the dust rose high above his head. (Homer, 2003, p.155)

The recklessness of Sisyphus’s defiance and the horror of his punishment were emphasized by the Greeks. The gods meant Sisyphus and his fate to be viewed with abhorrence and repulsion.

Over time, the myth of Sisyphus has opened out new possibilities and captured the attention of many artists and writers. Albert Camus in the twentieth century, used this tale as a title to his philosophical book, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). Camus adds new dimensions to the mythical character of Sisyphus and compels us to re-evaluate his fate from the standpoint of existentialist thought. The anguish of a post war generation in the modern times is reflected in the fate of Sisyphus, considered by Camus, to be an absurd hero. The task of Sisyphus is never complete and is an exercise in futility. His constant struggle without hope becomes a symbol for the meaninglessness of life. Nevertheless, Camus believes Sisyphus is self-aware and endures his punishment with resilience - a master of his fate.

This perspective of Camus leads us to re-assess the impact of the mythical character of Sisyphus, in an earlier age. We turn to Emily Brontë’s sole novel, *Wuthering Heights* (1847) specifically the character of Heathcliff. Emily Brontë, in her poems and only novel, does not use mythology directly or consciously. She, in fact prefers to create her own myths such as those of the Gondal warriors of her childhood writings. Nevertheless it seems unlikely that she would not be familiar with the Greek myths, considering her avid love of books and knowledge. In *Wuthering Heights*, the similarity of Sisyphus and the character of Heathcliff are evident and it does seem possible that Emily Brontë used Sisyphus as a prototype and a framework for her novel. The matter does not end there; Emily Brontë, using the classical myth, re-creates the persona of the Greek times and then shifts the focus to the creation of a personal myth; a new anti-hero with mythical, larger than life dimensions; whose story becomes a new archetype for the modern times.

Sisyphus had defied the gods and cheated death; and ultimately his defiance is punished. Heathcliff too, though living in a Christian world, challenges the religious set up of his times. The “absolute heathenism” of his early life and later, his diabolical desire for revenge is an aberration of the laws of religion. He defies God in his known universe, by setting up a parallel universe of human love - his deep and soulful love for Catherine, in opposition to God. Defiance along with disregard for the moral code and the replacement of God’s love with an alternate, all-consuming, wild, passionate love is Heathcliff’s challenge to the established order of religion.

Heathcliff, like Sisyphus, undergoes intense suffering. The separation from Catherine and subsequently her death, leads to bitter anguish. He subverts the entire notion of death when he cries out in agony:

Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest, as long as I am living! you said I killed you - haunt me, then! The murdered *do* haunt their murderers. I believe – I know that ghosts *have* wandered on earth. Be with me always – take any form – drive me mad! only *do* not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! Oh, God! it is unutterable! I *cannot* live without my life! I *cannot* live without my soul! (Brontë , 2003, p.169)

Heathcliff faces hell in life itself and his punishment is that of living, without his soul. He suffers undeniably and this is as severe as the suffering and punishment of Sisyphus.

The futility of the efforts of Sisyphus, find a reflection in Heathcliff’s actions too. The demonic revenge of Heathcliff proves fruitless; as the more he tries to get revenge, the less pleasure he gains from it. In the early part of the novel, when Hareton is a small child, Heathcliff unwittingly saves him from physical harm; and Hareton remains loyal to Heathcliff till the end. At the close of the novel, Heathcliff admits to their connection, saying, “Hareton seemed a personification of my youth,” (Brontë, 2003 p.323) Towards the end of the novel, the younger Catherine along with Hareton, makes Heathcliff’s entire effort go waste and he says, “An absurd termination to my violent exertions? I get levers and mattocks to demolish the two houses, and train myself to be like Hercules, and when everything is ready and in my power, I find the will to lift a slate off either roof has vanished!” (Brontë, 2003, p.323) Both, Hareton and the younger Catherine resemble the older Catherine, which is another reason that he cannot wreck them. The younger Catherine educates Hareton and the latter improves

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under her care and they establish a relationship that dissolves Heathcliff's desire for revenge. Ultimately Heathcliff loses his will to destroy and unknowingly helps to create a love in the younger generation, which signifies new hope and new beginnings.

For the Greeks, the story of Sisyphus was a moral lesson, to teach mankind that it does not pay to challenge the gods; and they would mete out unimaginable punishment if they were defied. In the nineteenth century, Heathcliff's story appalled its readers and created abhorrence for the character. In moralistic terms, both the entities disseminate repulsion, which is a deterrent to mankind, so as to avoid the actions and fate of Sisyphus and Heathcliff. To the modern readers, moral parameters have changed and both the ancient and nineteenth century entities are remarkable and unforgettable figures. Both display quiet determination and endurance; and show a great strength of character. Each of them draws sympathy and fascination from posterity.

Sisyphus is the original anti-hero and Heathcliff too is the protagonist and antagonist merged in one. Heathcliff's origins are unknown and his background considered to be dubious; whether he is a gypsy, or a devil is left to speculation. Mr Earnshaw tells his family, "but you must e'en take it as a gift of God; though it's as dark almost as if it came from the devil." (Brontë, 2003, p.36) Catherine warns Isabella, saying Heathcliff is "an unreclaimed creature, without refinement - without cultivation; an arid wilderness of furze and whinstone." (Brontë, 2003 p.102) Heathcliff's desire for revenge is ferocious and unrelenting. He is the protagonist, cunning and wicked with devil-like qualities; a villain hero.

The great effort of Sisyphus finds a counterpart in Heathcliff too. Both are self sustained and find an inner enthusiasm for all that they do. Until Catherine deserts him, Heathcliff is one with her, of one soul; but after that he is on his own and derives strength from inner motivation for revenge. He makes all efforts to mercilessly punish all those who wronged him. Just like Sisyphus, attempting to change fate; Heathcliff too plays the role of God in the lives of others who ventured to destroy him.

Like mythical entities, including Sisyphus, Heathcliff too is larger than life. Heathcliff resembles, as well as represents, the house Wuthering Heights. We are told at the outset, "Wuthering Heights is the name of Mr Heathcliff's dwelling, 'Wuthering' being a significant provincial adjective, descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in stormy weather..." (Brontë, 2003 p.4) The house and this inmate of the house share similar qualities; more than any other character in the novel. Later, Heathcliff mentions that Edgar cannot contain Catherine in his shallow cares, just like an oak cannot be planted in a flower-pot; this metaphor is more appropriately suited for Heathcliff. Heathcliff cannot be limited in narrow human boundaries and requires untamed Nature to grow to his full potential. He is an element of Nature; a destructive force, blighting all who mistreat him.

The spirit of human individualism is seen in Sisyphus and Heathcliff. Both of these two individuals never give up. They represent the force of the human heart as resilient and determined. Their endurance in the face of all odds is noteworthy.

There is a single-minded obsession of Heathcliff, with one thing and that being his love for Catherine. That is indeed a fatal flaw, which according to Aristotle, leads to tragic consequences; not unlike the fate of Sisyphus; and Oedipus for that matter. Heathcliff too, has the makings of a tragic hero.

Sisyphus and Heathcliff are both essentially alone; there is no one they can communicate with. As the younger Catherine points out to Heathcliff, "You are miserable, are you not? Lonely like the devil, and envious like him? Nobody loves you - nobody will cry for you, when you die!" (Brontë, 2003, p.288) Uncared for, rejected, and deprived of love, Heathcliff is a lone figure in the novel. The loneliness of Heathcliff is an echo of the isolation of Sisyphus.

The action of Sisyphus attempting to cheat death, finds a parallel, although a slight one, in the Heathcliff story too; Heathcliff also, tries to outwit death, interpreting laws of Nature in his own way. Believing that Catherine will remain on earth even after her death, he digs up her grave as soon as she is buried. Many years later, he bribes the sexton who is preparing the burial of Edgar, to slide out Catherine's body and to place it, as soon as he dies, in close proximity with his body. He takes gleeful pleasure in thinking, "by the time Linton gets to us, he'll not know which is which!" (Brontë, 2003, p.288)

Heathcliff, towards the end of the novel, anticipates his death and is wild with joy; he says, "I am within sight of my heaven" (Brontë, 2003, p.328) His heaven is to be reunited with Catherine, not the heaven imagined by ordinary mortals. He elaborates saying, "I have nearly attained *my* heaven; and of others is altogether unvalued, and uncoveted by me!" (Brontë, 2003, p.333) This could very well be true of Sisyphus; he has done what he wanted to do and is not looking for the traditional after life paradise. As Camus also speculates, Sisyphus has mastered his fate:

But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of the night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus as happy. (Camus, 1991, p.73)

Heathcliff too, is unrepentant and has struggled to achieve what he wanted. He, like Camus's Sisyphus, can be considered to be happy. On his death, "the country folk, if you ask them, would swear on their Bible that he walks. There are those who speak to having met him near the church, and on the moor, and even within this house"(Brontë, 2003, p.336) An old man and the young shepherd boy vouch that have seen a man and a woman roaming together as spirits. The supernatural, superstition and ghost stories come together to create a legend of the two lovers, Heathcliff and Catherine. They are reunited after death, in the after-life on earth itself, oblivious of the gods, heaven, hell and any moral or religious considerations. Their heaven is wherever they can be together.

Emily Brontë may have unconsciously used the Sisyphus story as a broad framework but she goes much beyond it. To the modern reader, her tale is not a moral story but the creation of a wild and passionate novel with Heathcliff as a raw force of elemental nature. It is the first time that in a novel, the protagonist is an amoral, villain hero; and that too a fascinating one. His wrong doings and cunning manipulations are relegated to the background as we witness the sufferings and agony of this character. What he does to avenge himself and his punishment seems to be less pertinent than his poignant anguish; he makes an uncanny connection with his readers.

In *Wuthering Heights*, the Sisyphus myth is re-enacted; the distressing suffering of Sisyphus is re-cast; the protagonist bears the stamp of earlier prototype; and the themes are universalized across the centuries. Emily Brontë has crafted the larger-than-life character of Heathcliff, on a grand scale and with mythical dimensions. She is not replicating the myth, but has her imaginative vision set on the creation of a new hero. The use of the Greek myth of Sisyphus is a catalyst that aids in developing Emily Brontë's new personal myth.

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