

## A Comparative Study of Elizabeth Bennet and Catherine Earnshaw as an Ideal Female Protagonist

Ms. Syeda Tuba Javaid

English Lecturer, Department of Science and Humanities, FAST-NUCES,  
Karachi, Pakistan.

**Abstract:** *Elizabeth Bennet and Catherine Earnshaw are two famous literary characters of English Literature and are the main female protagonists. They are complete characters who not only are rebellious, lively, but also, independent and head strong. Both of them lived their lives as per their own wish and will. Elizabeth believed in love and marriage and pursued the same maintaining her morals and principles. While Catherine sacrificed her eternal and immortal love for Heathcliff and surrendered to the norms of the society. The critical examination of their personalities and lives is presented analytically through opinions and views of different critics, writers and the plot of the novel. Their decisions not only affected them but also their loved ones. Thus, the paper deals with the issue of standing by principles and morals. The females are expected to stand firm on their decisions as they can change the course of the entire family. Hence, it is vital to understand the right path and then remain steadfast on it. These characters are idolized by many females of the West and the East making it important to understand their impact on society.*

**Key Words:** *Ideal female protagonist, Pride and prejudice, Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Austen, Wuthering Heights, Catherine Earnshaw, Emily Bronte.*

### Introduction:

Elizabeth Bennet and Catherine Earnshaw are the main female protagonists of the famous literary novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *Wuthering Heights* written by Jane Austen and Emily Bronte, respectively. They were strong, rebellious, and headstrong women who were similar and different in many traits. To analyse their characters, it is very important to understand both of the characters individually and to understand the characters it is vital to understand the perception of the writer when she wrote them. The character of any novel is also inspired by the writer; therefore, it is very important to understand the writer's life as well. Both the authors have tried to portray the society of the time and the characters and have a lot of similarities to their own life. Jane Austen portrays Elizabeth as an ideal woman and is the most loved character by her.

In the same way, Emily Bronte wrote *Wuthering Heights* to persuade and promote passionate love. Love which has no social boundaries as it is unconditional and immortal. This love is the true picture of the characters in the novel by Emily Bronte. Emily Bronte remained single

throughout her life searching for true love which she describes in her novel. Therefore, the first chapter of the discussion deals with the writer's perception of the characters. The second chapter is the detailed analysis of the character of Catherine Earnshaw as per the novel; her complete life from birth to death is discussed. The third chapter is the description of Elizabeth Bennet, her life and principals and the decisions she took and how they affected the lives of her loved ones. The fourth chapter is an in-depth comparative study of both the characters.

“Wuthering Heights” and “Pride and Prejudice” are masterpieces and most comprehensive literary works of English Literature. Both the female characters are termed as complete role models and ideals for the ladies of the West as well as the East and are recommended in order to learn how a lady acts, behaves and moves in the society. It also teaches women morals, values, traditions, importance of family and society.

### **Review of Literature**

A protagonist is the central figure of a narrative story, as per the Cambridge dictionary online (2011) it can be said that the protagonist is the main character of the plot that has good intentions but needs to have a tragic flaw. The protagonist will eventually bring climax to the plot and will be the moral compass for all characters. If the main protagonist is a female, then she should experience a downfall by her own tragic flaw and will have a happy ending in the end. She will prove herself as a strong character or at least have a moral ending. Strawser (2010) elaborates the main features of a female protagonist as at first the character needs to be underestimated and later on prove herself as a strong character. She turns out to be a superhero but still have strong feminist traits. The female characters will always be analyzed and characterized as per the norms and standards of the society.

Gold (1985) describes the personality of Catherine Earnshaw as a mother and perceives Wuthering Heights as a story of reincarnation and says that the personality of Catherine is misunderstood and defends her acts. Catherine strives for a noble position in the society which eventually leads her to decline and later dies of a brain hemorrhage. Her aspirations are then lived by her daughter who marries Heathcliff's son Linton and attains a noble position while being savage, lively and rebellious. Gold (1985) gives a different view of Catherine and states that poetic justice is present in all plots but a common eye is unable to comprehend it.

Shapiro (1969) compared Wuthering Heights with many other Victorian novels and says that in the novel a stranger is brought to an aristocratic family and is treated with cruelty. He later returns as a powerful man and takes revenge. This kind of relationship is very sacred in the Victorian era as there was a decline in religion at that time. Pessimism can be easily observed throughout the novel as the Victorian era was dark and negative in nature. Therefore, in order to analyze the characters, the society needs to be studied in depth as well. The type of a novel also elaborates the kind of characters in it. Ramsden (1982) portrays Wuthering Heights as a passionately romantic novel which later turns into vengeance, yet the romantic elements remains

till the end. *Wuthering Heights*'s structure is also very vital and interesting. The legal facts used in the novel indicates that the writer had authentic knowledge of the law as Heathcliff eventually becomes the owner of all wealth. Even the dates and days are very accurately utilized in the novel. Although these facts and figures have less effect on the characters but it shows the devotion of the writer in the novel. The literary devices used by Emily Bronte are also very fascinating as Schorer (1949) describes the use of epithets, imagery and metaphors in the novel. The comparison of Heathcliff's passion to the animals and the rhythmic use of words are perfect in the novel. Although, *Wuthering Heights* is a fiction, but the story is very realistic and deals with common issues related to women.

The house where Catherine lived also had an effect on her life as Cecil (1935) investigated that *Wuthering Heights* was similar to storm and the children living there are outgoing, wild, rough and extroverts. While Edgar's house *Thrushcross Grange* was a place similar to calm and quietness and the children living there; Edgar and Isabella, are very decent, sophisticated, balance and introverts in nature. Therefore, the marriages between them are "unnatural marriages". It also portrays the hospitable culture of the northern England. The love and hatred is very unique in the novel, no character is good or evil but overall they lack morals. Solomon (1959), considers Heathcliff as a dirty child. He questions the character of Mr. Earnshaw and claims that Heathcliff might have been his unlawful child. The rebellious nature of Catherine and Heathcliff was explained by Cai-yun (2010), stating that Catherine rebelled against religion as she wanted freedom, against society as she did not want to be controlled by her brother and later her husband, and lastly, against the moral system created by the society, as she desired to maintain her relationship with Heathcliff even after being married to Edgar. Woolf (1953) appreciates Emily Bronte and states that she has described the character of Catherine Earnshaw in detail in her novel, including how she was feeling and what she thinking. She believes that only a woman can understand the pain of a woman, and so Catherine is the most lovable woman in English Literature.

Jane Austen was a feminist writer, Brown (1983) explains that the female characters of her novel are very feminist who fight for women's rights and their role in the society. This feminist approach was also discovered by Jane Austen's biographer who claims her to be a women writer. Jane's Niece, James Edward also sees her aunt as a writer who wrote about womanhood and idealistic roles of women. Jane was herself never appreciated by her brothers and struggled to get their acceptance. Jane herself lacked any adventures but her novels are adventurous and can be a mirror of how she perceived the society and wanted to live. Shari, Ferriss and Woods (2002) quotes that the women writers and women critics appreciated and acknowledged the works of other women writers and encouraged them. Only a women is able to understand and justify the ideals of a women and Jane Austen has mastered this art. Chen (2010) elaborates the character of Elizabeth Bennet as a perfect women in terms of her role and personality. Her prejudice is very evident in the novel and can also be explained by the use of gazing in the novel. Chan (2002) observed the importance and use of gazing in *Pride and Prejudice*, the men of that time were

keen to observe the women and the women also tried to get their attention in order to get married. It further explains that first sight is limited as perceptions can change according to time as observed in the novel *Pride and Prejudice*. The observation can only be of external beauty while for internal beauty one would need to interact with the other person.

Most of the research has mainly focused on the novel itself; therefore, it becomes vital to compare them and understand their effect on the society. It gives a very vast and broader perception of life and its decisions and also emphasizes on the need to take the right decision at the right time.

**Research Question:**

- What are the similarities and differences between Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights* and Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* as an ideal main female protagonist of their novels?
- Who is the ideal female protagonist of English literature and what impact does she have on the society?

**Significance:**

The research is significant for girls and women living in a moralistic society. It will help them understand the norms and traditions of the society. It will help them understand the consequences of taking a decision and its effect on the lives of their loved ones. Love and marriage are a vital part of a woman's life and they are greatly influenced by the female characters of the novels they read; therefore, it becomes vital to understand their characters and treat them as a moral compass.

**Discussion:****Chapter 1: Writer's perspective of the leading female protagonists:**

An ideal female protagonist needs to have a standardized criteria, not every female character is the protagonist of the novel. Many critics believe that the female character needs to face a downfall by her own tragic flaw and eventually find happiness. Strawser (2010) explains that she should be spontaneous, groomed and her character should developed as the plot proceeds. She should possess strong moralistic principles while being a realistic character.

To understand the character of Elizabeth and Catherine, it is important to explore the writers' perspective as Merriman (2006) claims that Jane Austen never got married herself because she herself believed in marrying out of love. All of the female protagonists in her novels believed in love and married their respective lovers. Jane Austen highlighted the issues of inheritance, courtship, morals and marriage through her novels. Similarly, Merriman (2007) explains that *Wuthering Heights* is a story of eternal love and revenge and portrays the female protagonist as a

strong headed and rebellious women who would go to any extent to keep her love close to herself.

### **Chapter 2: The Character of Catherine Earnshaw:**

Catherine Earnshaw is a very lively, outgoing person who has a good and loving personality and is loved by everyone. Heathcliff and Edgar both adored her to life. The story revolves around her. Heathcliff was frustrated because she leaves him for money and social stature which eventually leads him to take revenge with every other character in the novel. Heathcliff ruins all three generations in the novel. The novel revolves around the relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff who shared an eternal bond of love and compassion.

The entire life of Catherine Earnshaw is described in detail in the novel, her birth, her childhood, her desires, her likes, her dislikes, her marriage, her love and eventually her death. She has been illustrated as a savage, wild and rebellious woman. Her governess, Nelly once said that Catherine was a mischievous girl who had high spirits and wild nature, but she had the sweetest smile (Bronte 1994, pp 49). At another occasion she said that Catherine was a proud girl (Bronte 1994, pp 69).

After getting hurt, she lives at the Thrushcross range for a few days, the house of Edgar which brings about a change in her personality and she attains a very different nature. During this Nelly discovered that Catherine had turned into a very different person and acted like a sophisticated lady (Bronte 1994, pp 86).

As a young child, Catherine was attracted towards Heathcliff but her elder brother Hindley never liked Heathcliff and their wild nature, even her mother never liked Heathcliff. Her family left no stone unturned to humiliate, insult and degrade Heathcliff, but Catherine liked him and played with him all through her childhood. When her father dies and Hindley becomes the head of the family and becomes cruel towards Heathcliff. At this point, a different Catherine is observed, as she becomes selfless towards Heathcliff and shows her loving and caring nature. Catherine can be seen as the only positive figure in the life of Heathcliff.

After her return from Edgar's house, she becomes attracted towards the different life of Edgar, thus, when he proposes to her, she accepts it. Catherine narrates to Nelly, that she will marry Edgar because it will make her the greatest woman of the neighborhood and she will be proud to have such a husband (Bronte 1994, pp 78).

Catherine also has a very confused personality, she could not decide whom she loves more and believes that she is in love with two men at the same time. She is fascinated by the life and personality of Edgar. She likes the elegant, decent and sophisticated living but her love and passion for Heathcliff is unconditional. She had always wished to marry Heathcliff but she knew that he had no money or social stature. Thus, they will become beggars. Her brother would have

never accepted Heathcliff and would have become crueler towards him. She explains to Nelly that her love for Edgar is like a weather which changes frequently but her love for Heathcliff is eternal and will never change. She also confesses that she can feel the misery of Heathcliff as her own (Bronte 1994, pp 81).

This conversation is overheard by Heathcliff and he feels insulted; therefore he leaves Wuthering Heights and disappears without saying anything to anyone. This hurts Catherine deeply, and she has no other choice left then to marry Edgar. For three years she lives happily with Edgar, until the return of Heathcliff when she expresses her joy to Edgar. But unlike Catherine, Edgar hates Heathcliff just like Hindley and does not appreciate his return. Catherine invites Heathcliff to her house for dinner but Edgar objects to it. He asks Nelly to set another table for the servants. Catherine openly displays her compassion for Heathcliff and never hides her feelings and tries to relive her relationship with him. She was happy with Edgar but her inner self was deteriorating without Heathcliff. Catherine also objects to Heathcliff's marriage to Edgar's sister Isabella as she loved him passionately and she knew that Isabella would never be happy with him. She was also very possessive about Heathcliff and could not even think about sharing him with anyone. Thus, when she sees him kissing Isabella, she falls ill.

After this, she tries to meet Heathcliff and justify her decision to marry Edgar and how she regrets it now. She also tells him that she is miserable without him and loves him unconditionally and eternally. At the same night she gives birth to a daughter, Cathy, and dies during childbirth.

### **Chapter 3: The Character of Elizabeth Bennet:**

Elizabeth Bennet is the second daughter of Mr. Bennet. She is a keen observer and often judges people on the basis of first impression. Her first impression of Mr. Darcy is very negative and considers him as a rude and arrogant man who is very proud of his money and social stature. The story starts with a neighborhood party and is the first meeting between Mr. Bennet's Family, Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley. It is during this party that Mr. Bingley develops feeling for Jane, Elizabeth's elder sister and Mr. Darcy refuses to dance with Elizabeth being a proud man who considers Elizabeth beneath her. This creates a prejudice in Elizabeth's mind towards Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth is a sophisticated, decent, wise and good looking woman but Mr. Darcy is unable to see this. Elizabeth develops a hatred towards him as she gets to know more about him later on. Mr. Darcy eventually sees Elizabeth as the woman she truly is and is infatuated by her intelligence, wit and nature.

Elizabeth also has a strong perception about Mr. Collins, and considers him a very immature and silly man. Therefore, when Mr. Collins proposes Elizabeth, she rejects him. Her mother becomes infuriated and opposes her decision but she becomes determined not to marry Mr. Collins. She clearly states that she will marry out of love not out of compulsion or money. She also expresses that she will never have any kind of attraction or feelings for a man like Mr. Collins.

Despite being an intelligent woman, she is fooled by Mr. Wickham and his fake story. Mr. Wickham realizing that Elizabeth hates Mr. Darcy, tells her that Mr. Darcy robbed him off his inheritance and tries to allure Elizabeth so that she would elope with him. Elizabeth is initially impressed by Wickham but her younger sister Lydia falls in love with him. Lydia develops a relationship with Mr. Wickham and elopes with him. In order to safeguard the honor of Mr. Bennet, Mr. Darcy gets them married, considering the wicked nature of Mr. Wickham, Lydia lives miserably on the charity of Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy for the rest of her life. After getting betrayed by Mr. Wickham, Elizabeth realizes that she was prejudice towards people, and resents; hence, she decides to stand up for the betterment of her family and herself.

Elizabeth is very fond of her family. While her mother often embarrasses her publicly by her silly acts, yet, she is offended when Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley's sister mocks her mother. Elizabeth expresses all her feelings to Jane and wants her to be happy. When Mr. Bingley proposes Jane, Elizabeth is overjoyed but the sudden disappearance of Mr. Bingley upsets her and she becomes determined to console her sister and bring back her happiness. She even rejects Mr. Darcy's proposal as he was responsible for ruining Jane's life and the disappearance of Mr. Bingley.

Elizabeth's relationship with Mr. Darcy is very important as she judged him very quickly. Mr. Darcy felt that Elizabeth had no charm which could ever tempt him. She dislikes Mr. Darcy due to this comment and later on this turns into hatred as she believes in the story of Mr. Wickham. Also, when Mr. Darcy suggests to Mr. Bingley not to marry Jane as he felt that she would never be able to conform in their aristocratic society. Nevertheless, Mr. Darcy develops feelings towards Elizabeth and proposes her. At this time, Elizabeth clearly mentions that he ruined her sister's life; thus, she would never marry him. Mr. Darcy in return writes a letter to her and clears her misunderstanding. He mentions that he thought that Jane didn't love Mr. Bingley and was being forced into marriage by her mother which is why he asked Mr. Bingley to leave Jane. Mr. Darcy also tells her that Mr. Wickham is an evil person and a gambler who tried to trap his sister Georgia for her inheritance. Mr. Darcy was able to stop Mr. Wickham in ruining his own sister's life. Mr. Darcy also explains to her that he didn't know that Jane loves Mr. Bingley, otherwise, he would have never separated them.

The letters of Mr. Darcy affects her deeply and she gets attracted towards Mr. Darcy. She also regrets her decision of rejecting Mr. Darcy's proposal. Mr. Darcy, even after being rejected by Elizabeth, helps her family in finding Lydia and Wickham and in reuniting Jane and Mr. Bingley. This selfless act of Mr. Darcy results in deep love of Elizabeth for Mr. Darcy. Without a doubt, Elizabeth is the ideal female protagonist who is very straightforward, outspoken and has a good heart. She thinks of all her decisions and doesn't take them hastily.

#### **Chapter 4: Comparative study:**

Elizabeth Bennet and Catherine Earnshaw have a lot of similarities and differences. In *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine's entire life is described: her childhood, her likes, her dislikes, her upbringing, her youth, her love, her marriage and her death. But in the novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth's youth and her marriage with Mr. Darcy is described. Seeing this, we get an insight of the life of Catherine and can understand why she took such decisions but for Elizabeth we can only make assumptions.

Catherine had always rebelled against her family by remaining friends with the family's servant Heathcliff. As she grows up, this childhood friendship turns into a passionate love which is eternal and unconditional. Continuous rebel had made her wild and rough, yet, she could not rebel against the social norms. Whereas, Elizabeth not only rebelled against her own mother but also against the societal norm of early marriage. She goes against the wishes of her mother and refuses the marriage proposal of Mr. Collins even though her family could go bankrupt. She keeps her firm belief that marriage should be out of love not out of compulsion or money.

Elizabeth was her father's favorite just as Catherine but Elizabeth was very close to her sisters as well and had a close knit family bond. She stood by her family when Mr. Darcy mocks her family even when she knew that he was not completely wrong. She also profoundly objected to her father making fun of her mother when she acted silly. She did realize that her mother usually acted like a silly person but she was firm that children should always respect their parents and so the husband should do so with his wife, for the better upbringing of their children. Whereas Catherine had always rebelled against her family and didn't respect them at all. It was only Heathcliff that she had feelings for and could not stand her family degrading, humiliating or insulting him. Her father died when she was very young which is why she was very lonely and desired attention. This attention was only given to her by Heathcliff. Therefore, she turned out to be a wild and outgoing girl with no sense of morality.

Elizabeth believed in marrying out of love but she was shattered by Mr. Bingley who rejected her sister Jane due to social stature and thinks about marrying anyone who proposes to her. But she quickly regained her faith as she was very smart and didn't want to make a silly decision which she would have regretted throughout her life. Eventually, she falls in love with Mr. Darcy and agrees to marry him. Catherine on the other hand deeply loved Heathcliff but did not marry him as she knew that he was a servant and had no money and she would become a beggar if she married him as her brother would not let them live in his house. Thus, she marries Edgar as she is attracted to his different life, she regrets this decision throughout her life and falls into depression which eventually takes her life.

Morality and ethics play a vital role in our life and also when analyzing anyone's life and character. Elizabeth and Catherine both wanted a happy married life but their decisions later on affected others as well. Catherine took a morally incorrect decision by marrying Edgar while she was in love with Heathcliff and later on when she wanted to maintain her relationship with him

even after marriage. When she had submitted her will to her family's pride and society she should have stayed firm on it. It was unrealistic and quite obvious that Edgar or any man with honor would have never allowed his wife to be friends or be in love with a servant. Catherine, after realizing her mistake, is deeply hurt and falls terminally and fatally ill. Due to this moral disillusionment, she suffers from brain hemorrhage and dies. But Elizabeth had strong upbringing and moral values. She profoundly refuses the two proposals of Mr. Collins; as it was out of money, and Mr. Darcy; as he ruined her sister's life, on moral grounds. She eventually marries Mr., Darcy, after falling in love and realizing that he was innocent.

Apart from these differences, there are a lot of similarities in their characters as well. They had the same rebellious nature and were very close to the people they loved. Elizabeth loved her family and Catherine loved Heathcliff. Elizabeth helped her sister Jane by reuniting her with Mr. Bingley, and Lydia, by bringing her back to home. Similarly, Catherine regards Edgar's sister Isabella as her own and opposes her marriage with Heathcliff as she knew that Isabella would regret it later. Both the characters desired their own happiness but not at the cost of others. Thus, Catherine's desires are morally incorrect but Elizabeth is always appreciated by her father.

### **Conclusion:**

Understanding the characters of the ideal female protagonist earlier, it is easier to critically analyze their decisions, characters and its consequences on their lives and the effect on the lives of the women of today. Elizabeth Bennet was a headstrong, independent, and strong women, she stayed steadfast on her values, morals and principles to marry only for love. She was determined to marry after falling in love even if it meant for her to remain unmarried for life or be bankrupt and live on streets. She strongly disagreed to the idea of sacrificing herself and conforming to the society. Elizabeth having faced a lot of family financial issues desired to find a solution. She was committed that decisions should not be based on anyone's suffering. She wanted to solve her family's financial problems in a way which would not only make her family happy but also such that she would have inner satisfaction and relief.

Catherine Earnshaw was a stubborn, arrogant but a very strong woman. She was an extrovert but had a very rebellious nature. She is termed as selfish by many as she wanted to live her life as per her own desires, wishes and will. She rebelled against the society and her family to remain friends with their servant Heathcliff. Catherine was a young energetic girl who knew little about passion. She was passionately in love with Heathcliff but she knew that he was not suitable for her because of financial and social constraints. So, when Edgar asks her to marry him, she agrees. Catherine's nature was wild and rough which was more compatible with Heathcliff; thus, during her marriage she always felt out of place. When Heathcliff returns after some years, Catherine goes astray, with his return, the love and passion in Catherine's heart also returns. Catherine does not hide her feelings for Heathcliff and expresses them openly. She also expresses her desire to maintain her relationship with Heathcliff which Edgar objects to on

moralistic grounds. Catherine slowly and gradually realizes her mistake and ignorance of not accepting Heathcliff years ago and eventually starts to feel suffocated in a society which is hypocritical and has double standards. A society where a man is allowed to marry a servant or a woman of lower class as in the case of her brother, but would not let her do so with Heathcliff. Her thirst for love was revived as she lived with the help of her passionate love for Heathcliff and she died due to her separation.

By critically examining the lives and end of Elizabeth and Catherine, it can be said that Elizabeth had a happy fairytale ending by remaining steadfast on her principles to marry someone out of love. Her love helps her solve her family issues as Mr. Darcy always stands by her. Elizabeth's patience and virtue entrusts her with eternal joy without conforming to the society. Whereas in Catherine's case, she surrenders to the society but is unable to attain peace and tranquility, she regrets her decision to marry Edgar and eventually dies due to depression of being separated from Heathcliff. Thus, it can be said that conforming or not conforming to the societal pressures should be based on principles, morals and ethics. It is a fact that society have some taboos but there are certain elements which are morally incorrect and should not be pursued in any case whatsoever. Finally, it can be said that Catherine is not a true ideal female protagonist but Elizabeth definitely is.

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