



Identity Crisis in *Wuthering Heights*
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Abstract

This paper examines the identity crisis experienced by the main characters, Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw, through a Freudian lens in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. The identity in the novel is not seen as a psychological unity but rather as a fragile construct, socially conflicted and formed through memories of experiences that include deep trauma, the repression of unconscious desire, and social repression. The paper focuses on the characters of Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw, as well as the experiences of children who have been subjected to emotional neglect and marginalized in society. Such experiences pave the way for the emergence of destructive relationships and unstable identities. Using Freudian concepts of the unconscious and repression, along with the theory of the conflict among the id, ego, and superego, she shows that the main characters suffer from an inability to integrate their identities.

Keywords: Identity crisis, Freudian concepts, Id, Ego, Superego

أزمة الهوية في مرتفعات وذرينج

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ملخص: تبحث هذه الورقة في أزمة الهوية التي مرت بها الشخصيات الرئيسية، هيثكليف وكاترين ايرنشو، من خلال عدسة فرويد في مرتفعات وذرينج لبرونتيه. لا ينظر الى الهوية في الرواية على انها وحدة نفسية بل على انها بنية هشة متضاربة اجتماعيا وتشكلت من خلال ذكريات التجارب التي تشمل الصدمة العميقة، وقمع في الرغبة اللاواعية، والقمع الاجتماعي. تركز الورقة على شخصيات هيثكليف وكاترين ايرنشو، وكذلك تجارب الاطفال الذين تعرضوا للاهمال العاطفي والتهميش في المجتمع. مثل هذه التجارب تمهد الطريق لظهور علاقات مدمرة وهويات غير مستقرة. تستخدم مفاهيم فرويد عن اللاوعي والقمع، الى جانب نظرية الصراع بين الهوية والأنا و الأنا العليا، لإظهار ان الشخصيات الرئيسية تعاني من عدم القدرة على دمج هوياتهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أزمة الهوية، مفاهيم فرويدية، الهوية الشخصية، الأنا، والأنا العليا



1. Introduction

1.1 The Concept of Identity Crisis

Identity Crisis occurs when there is a lack of a steady psychological state for a person, leading them to be indecisive, broken into pieces, and fragmented in their own self-identity. In character analysis within literature, identity crises are explored through a character in a state of war, trying to harmonize their inner longings with opposing social, ethical, or cultural structures. Freudian theories within Psychoanalytical theories expound that one's identity is formed by one's subconscious and early childhood, repressions, and inner conflicts with unresolved trauma. When these elements are left un-integrated, they create a divided or unstable self-identity, leading to conflict and self-destructive behavior. (Gao, 2006; Mamgain et al., 2025; Asl, 2014a).

Within Gothic literature, a crisis of self becomes more pronounced with the inclusion of doubling, the other, and the psychological extremes of a person. There are instances of multiple personae, and of characters swinging between polar extremes, including affection and aggression, surrender and insurrection, and the wild and civilized. According to multiple historians, the disintegration of self, along with the fragmentation of the self as a whole, represents the most pronounced fears of the society and the individual, which is what makes the Gothic the most appropriate genre for the exploration of an identity crisis (McBride, 2017; Al-Hilo & Gebreen, 2020). In this regard, conflict is what makes identity a paradigm of stability. It is a unified identity, though, because there is no conflict.

1.2 Overview of *Wuthering Heights* and Its Critical Reception

February 1847 saw the release of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, which holds a special place in English Literature for its unique narrative style, intense emotion, and Gothic atmosphere. In contrast with other novels of the Victorian era, which emphasize the importance of morals and the resolution of social standing, *Wuthering Heights* depicts a world of overwhelming, dark, and cruel obsession, as well as psychological turbulence with no resolution. The novel focuses on the destructive and toxic relationship between Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff and the resultant damage from emotional deprivation, social isolation, and trauma that goes unresolved in their lives (Brontë, 1847; Bloom, 2007).

The novel's critical reception is not stagnant. In the early years, it received backlash for its supposed violence and lack of morals. However, later assessments appreciated its complexities, including its psychological aspects and its use of novel,



unrepeatable storytelling techniques. In later years, critical reception has shifted towards issues such as the trauma of the self, identity and theory, and the unconscious mind, mainly focusing on the complexities of desire and repression to uncover and highlight the novel's embodiment of these themes (Asl, 2014a; Bernard, 2023). *Wuthering Heights* is thus not only a tale of tragic love but also a psychological study of the instability of identity.

1.3 Theoretical/Methodological Framework

Drawing primarily on psychoanalytic theory and psychological critique, this article analyzes *Wuthering Heights* through the theme of identity crisis. The characters' identities and behaviors are destroyed and destabilized, and can be explained using Freudian theories of repression, unconscious desires, and the conflict between the id, ego, and superego (Gao, 2006; Yin, 2024). With these frameworks, we can see how the characters' psychological turmoil affects their self-perceptions and perceptions of others. Methodologically, this research is a close reading of the primary text, *Wuthering Heights*. Secondary sources are limited to peer-reviewed articles, theses, and Psychoanalytic critiques, Trauma studies, and related Identity studies, as they pertain to Trauma theory, loss and emotional neglect, and/or social exclusion and persistent Identity disturbance in Catherine and Heathcliff (Foroughi & Ramazani, 2024; Clavería Benabarre, 2025).

This research uses a Freudian psychoanalytic approach, focusing on the theories of unconscious desire, repression, and the conflict of the psyche, and building on the identity crisis in *Wuthering Heights*. The other theoretical trauma and Gothic criticisms are used to supplement the psychoanalytic reading.

1.4 Aim and Structure of the Paper

This paper aims to elaborate on identity crisis as a predominant psychological and thematic phenomenon in *Wuthering Heights*. *Wuthering Heights* has a psychological aspect that has to do with the identities of Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff, which this paper puts forth as the result of trauma, repression, and social conflicts, yielding incomplete identities with no balance. The paper builds on the intersection of psychoanalysis and Gothic ideologies to examine identity representations in the novel and concludes that identity is a tenuous, perennially challenged construct rather than a whole and consistent entity (Asl, 2014a; Bernard, 2023).

This research is organized so that the first section, the introduction, provides a discussion of the identity crisis, the novel's critical background, and the research's theoretical scope. Future chapters discuss the available research on *Wuthering*



Heights, psychoanalysis, and identity. The analytical chapters will examine the fragmentation of Catherine Earnshaw's identity and Heathcliff's otherness and trauma, as well as the construction of his identity. The last section of this research is the conclusion; it provides a summary of the paper's results and outlines the contribution of this paper to the scholarship on Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Scholarship on Identity, Psychology, and Alterity in *Wuthering Heights*

Scholarly work on *Wuthering Heights* is marked by deep consideration of the novel's psychological intricacies and its representation of the conflicted self. Both early and current reviewers have noted that Earnshaw's and Heathcliff's characters lack a stable identity. Instead, they demonstrate unconscious desires, repression, and emotional overabundance. *Wuthering Heights* has been the subject of psychoanalytic studies within the framework of Freudian theory, and the characters' supposed destructive behaviors have been linked to internal strife among the id, ego, and superego (Gao, 2006; Mamgain et al., 2025; Yin, 2024).

Apart from the psychoanalytic aspect of *Wuthering Heights*, some researchers have focused on the unprocessed trauma of early loss, neglect, and emotional deprivation. Parental emotional neglect trauma is also suggested as the cause of Catherine's emotional incoherence and divided loyalty, while the self-destructive violence is attributed to Heathcliff's unbearable humiliation and exclusion (Foroughi & Ramazani, 2024; Asl, 2014a). These studies show that, in this novel, psychological distress and memories, rather than rational self-reflection, are at play. Played a significant role in identity formation.

The otherness is another issue that has also attracted considerable attention. Heathcliff is often viewed as a Gothic other and is considered socially marginalized and racially indefinite, as well as being emotionally extreme. This representation places him on the verge of the identity frameworks of the Victorian era. The critics Puritan and postcolonial suggest that, rather than social inclusion or social integration, self-formation occurs through exclusion, opposition, and revenge (Ghosh & Kabir, 2022; McBride, 2017). The critics Lin and Zhu (2017) and Al-Hilo and Gebreen (2020) build on McBride's assertion about Gothic criticism and self-division and also suggest that alterity is a form of doubling and haunting, wherein lies the essence of the novel's plot structure.

All of the above show that *Wuthering Heights* is part of a larger conversation regarding the novel's psychological and traumatic influences, and the interest in



Gothic literature is considerable. The problem, however, is that most studies on identity, trauma, and alterity focus on each of them in isolation rather than interdependently.

2.2 Gaps in Existing Scholarship

As much as there is literature in the paper of the characters and identity of the characters in *Wuthering Heights*, there is still more literature to go through and gaps to fill. There is more to the psychological studies that focus on the core mechanisms of psychological processes, i.e., repression. There is a difference between psychological mechanisms that focus on the broad impacts of psychological repression and the studies that focus on identity crises on a broad spectrum. Popular studies such as Gao (2006) and Yin (2024) focus on single psychological mechanisms and their impact on identity fragmentation, but it seems that the psychological mechanisms do much more. An impact of single psychological mechanisms is identity fragmentation. There is a need to examine the impact of multiple psychological mechanisms on identity fragmentation and how that impacts identity fragmentation as an organizing principle of the narrative.

With trauma-based studies, there is more emphasis on characters such as Catherine or Heathcliff who suffer from the consequences of trauma, and studies do very little to focus on the trauma of characters suffering in the same setting with the same context. There is still trauma neglect on characters suffering from the same setting as a unit, and how the trauma echoes as a unit. It seems that such studies focus on only one character, and because of this fragmentation, an identity crisis results from circular dependency. The self is formed through rivalry and emotional fusion, which are the only means of an identity crisis. While many studies on alterity and Heathcliff's marginality based on class, race, or Gothic otherness have been done, these studies isolate social identity from psychological identity. Thus, the relationship between social exclusion and the unconscious mind remains largely unexamined (Ghosh & Kabir, 2022; McBride, 2017). Less still focus on this or the identity crisis as shedding interdisciplinary critical light on the composite of trauma, psychoanalysis, and alterity.

2.3 The Theoretical Approach

To address these oversights, the paper takes an integrated theoretical approach that combines psychoanalytic, trauma, and Gothic criticism to foreground the identity-crisis theme that permeates *Wuthering Heights*. Instruments of Freudian psychoanalysis offer insights into the workings of the underdeveloped mind,



repressed tensions, and the layers of psychical discord that account for the characters' fragile and volatile identities, senses of self, or selves (Asl, 2014a; Mamgain et al., 2025). These concepts explain the fractured, poor sense of identity, which exhibits fundamental and irreconcilable discrepancies.

This theory is also enhanced by trauma studies, which discuss the consequences of losing affection and continual emotional trauma, which accounts for the inability to achieve identity cohesion and the worsened persistence of behavior, along with the emotional destruction that perpetually holds Catherine and Heathcliff's interactions and relationships (Foroughi & Ramazani, 2023). This theory is also strengthened by Gothic criticism, which situates the identity crisis in a literary context that elaborates on motifs of doubles, haunting, and self-conflict as a means of inner torment (Al-Hilo & Gebreen, 2020; Lin & Zhu, 2017).

Having incorporated these insights, the paper seeks to go beyond fragmented, character-psychology-focused interpretations to identify the identity crisis as the paramount thematic element that fuels the story. This integrated theoretical framework allows for a more nuanced understanding of the interaction of *Wuthering Heights*' most destructive identities: psychological conflict, trauma, and alterity.

3. The Social and Psychological Roots of Identity Crisis

3.1 Heathcliff is Ambiguous Origins, Adoption, and Racialized Otherness

Heathcliff's crisis began with his unstable beginnings and feeling out of place socially with others. As the unrecognized and unacknowledged orphan, Heathcliff is a mystery, and because of the vagueness surrounding his family, he has no social identification with the family or the community. Such children represent the foundational fragmentation of social identity. Lacking a basis of origin, identity fragmentation of the social self is inevitable. Through the prism of Freudian theory, such rootless childhood and social identity dislocation are foundational for weak ego formation, and the social self is almost nonexistent, as there is no symbolic or emotional anchoring for identification, resulting in a lack of equilibrium.

Even though the Earnshaw family took him in, he continues to feel emotionally and socially distanced, particularly following the death of Mr. Earnshaw. This type of acceptance creates a fractured self in which one's feelings of love and hate remain unresolved. Heathcliff's later preoccupation with revenge is, in the view of psychoanalytic critics, a compulsive re-enactment of an early trauma in which the unconscious seeks to control the pain of the past through self-destructive behavior (Asl, 2014a; Al-Hasani, 2023). Heathcliff's formation of an identity, therefore, was



not the result of amalgamation but a result of exclusion, violence, self-repression, and the violent assertion of the self.

3.2 Catherine's Divided Identity: Social Ambition versus Emotional Authenticity

In some cases, social mobility is defined as apostasy—a person who is entirely accepted into a social group. However, some members of that group may find it difficult to accept that person and may try various ways to exclude them. Catherine Earnshaw... the social integrity and social assimilation of the role are not as problematic as for Heathcliff. The fragmentation, however, is Internal. The social assimilation of marrying Edgar Linton was a hope of gaining social stability, along with social refinement, social security, and social wealth. From this point of view, the ego and superego are acting socially, indicating that the integration of instincts does not act independently. (Gao, 2006; Mamgain et al. 2025)

On the other hand, with Heathcliff, Catherine has a social and eternal bond. She is an integral part of Heathcliff. Thus, her statement, 'I am Heathcliff,' is not in the form of a romantic, unifying relationship, but rather is an illustration of ego boundary collapse, a balanced, or homogeneous, identity, or a missing ego flaw of a social unit (Brontë, 1847; Bernard, 2023). Psychoanalysts interpret this to be a 'complete customer' inhibition, identity diffusion of self with the missing-ego component, the integrated romantic component, or the desired self. This contradictory and opposing relationship causes catharsis disturbance, leading to an inability of the emotional/performance system.

Studies into trauma further explain this pattern of behavior. Catherine's blank response to her surroundings stems from an emotionally intense, uncaring environment with unstable boundaries. This has led to her inability to form a coherent identity. Analysts have claimed that Catherine demonstrates psychological instability akin to trauma-related identity disruption (Foroughi & Ramazani, 2024). With a Freudian perspective, Catherine's identity crisis is a result of an internal battle between an unacknowledged want and a given identity by society, culminating in madness.

3.3 Childhood Environments and the Formation of Adult Identity

The places in which Heathcliff and Catherine are raised are instrumental in understanding the adults THEY become. Heathcliff and Catherine both grow up in homes where emotions are unstable and violence, favoritism, and instability are common. One scholarly source points to the importance of such formative



experiences to the unconscious foundations of identity (Asl, 2014a) - especially if there is no emotional security. Instead of being a stable place, the Earnshaw home is a place of psychological excess and repression. Heathcliff's childhood is marred by emotional neglect, physical abuse, and social decline, which makes it difficult for him to develop a stable ego. All these social factors conspire to produce a defensive identity, marked by aggression and domination in his later years. His cruelty is a prime example of what Freud describes as repetition compulsion - where a person is driven to self-destructive behavior and cruelty in an attempt to resolve a trauma (Al-Hasani, 2023; Clavería Benabarre, 2025). Catherine has a similar upbringing, and, lacking emotional containment, she is unable to control her impulses, integrate the synergistic components of the self, or use them to stabilize and direct her behavior.

It has been argued that the characters are permanently stuck in the roles they developed in childhood because they are psychologically caught in those roles and never manage to develop a mature, integrated role personality (Asl, 2014b; Bernard, 2023). As opposed to leaving it as a phase that will eventually go away, *Wuthering Heights* models the condition of identity crisis as a secondary, ever-present state that originates from unresolved psychological trauma at a young age.

4. Identity Crisis and Interpersonal Relationships

4.1 Catherine and Heathcliff as Doubles and Mirror Identities

A significant aspect of the identity crisis in the novel is the relationship the two main characters get into and the psychological double-ness that arises for both, rather than the development of their roles as autonomous selves. In ego psychology, this doubling is indicative of a failure of ego differentiation, or, in a simpler sense, a disturbance of the boundaries between self and other. Catherine's claim that "I am Heathcliff" is not a claim of emotional unity but rather a claim that there is no individual essence, and this is indicative of Catherine losing her self-identification through the disconnections of self-identity and self-recognition via psychic fusion (Brontë, 1847; Bernard, 2023).

Some critics believe that the character of Heathcliff is the unconscious double of Catherine, serving as the repressed desires and the multitudinous instinctual drives that cannot be integrated into Catherine's socially permissible self-identity. Through a Freudian lens, Catherine's id is captured in the character of Heathcliff, while Catherine's constructed external persona serves as the ego, and socio-cultural influences serve as the superego (Gao, 2006; Mamgain et al., 2025). Because of the mirroring, the characters' identities weaken, as neither can be complete without the



other. Because of this bond, there exists a pathological interdependence that can be linked to unconscious identification rather than more conscious and mature relational attachments.

4.2 Toxic Symbiosis: Love as a Destabilizing Force

The feeling of affection in *Wuthering Heights* functions as a destabilizing and destructive force rather than confirming one's self. The emotional existence of Catherine and Heathcliff is symbiotic in that one's toxic presence determines the other's identity. This phenomenon is explained through Freudian psychoanalysis as a fixation at a particular stage of psycho-development where the individual has not yet undergone the separation and individuation process (Asl, 2014a). Consequently, the feeling of love is a source of anxiety, and in place of emotional safety, it leads to a feeling of loss.

The psychological disintegration of Catherine is a result of her attempt to separate her social identity from her emotional bond, something that leads to Catherine marrying Edgar Linton. This was an attempt to forge the socially validated self; however, it leads to significant internal conflict, as her unconscious attachment to Heathcliff is repressed (Bernard, 2023). This is where Freud's repression of the impulse that leads to the resurfacing, not as a desire, but psychological repression, where that illness manifests in one's emotional volatility. This is evident in Catherine's emotional volatility and illness (Foroughi & Ramazani, 2024).

Even after Catherine's rejection, Heathcliff's identity becomes increasingly destructive and rigid. The love he has turns to obsession and revenge, revealing a fixation on loss that prevents him from developing an identity of his own. Heathcliff's failure to grieve Catherine appropriately gives rise to repetition compulsion, wherein violence and control are exercised as the result of unaddressed loss (Al-Hasani, 2023; Asl, 2014a). Thus, love in the novel does not promote reciprocal acknowledgement but rather continues the self's disintegration.

4.3 Edgar and Isabella as Identity Foils

Edgar and Isabella Linton contrast with each other, highlighting the pathological relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine. Edgar exemplifies social, moral, and ego control. He is the personification of a socially proper persona, with no unconscious desire. He exemplifies the ego Freud describes as well-regulated, driven by the imposition of social order and by the instinctive repression of anything related to disorder (Gao, 2006). Catherine's inability to associate with Edgar illustrates the psychological dissonance that arises from not having a socially regulated identity.



In contrast, Isabella exemplifies an identity shaped by illusion and emotional weakness. Isabella's romantic Heathcliff is a projection of an ill-formed understanding of what a person is and a complete lack of self-awareness. After Heathcliff reveals his toxic identity to Isabella, she ends up with psychological disillusionment. The identity she ends up with is not a fantasy identity, which speaks to the destructive nature of the relationship (Claveria Benabarre, 2025). This speaks to the destructive nucleus of the relationship and the damage caused by a relationship that fails to recognize what a relationship is in the first place. Freudian, Isabella reveals object choice and directed desire as the nucleus of one of the biggest concerns an individual can face in life.

In conclusion, Edgar and Isabella contrast with Shakespeare's Catherine and Heathcliff. They emphasize that what they have is not a mere tragic relationship. It is a relationship that is, in fact, tragic and, as a result, pathological. By examining these relationship patterns, Brontë demonstrates how crises of identity are perpetuated and compounded by relationships that abrogate the individuation process and solidify the unconscious reliance on another (McBride, 2017; Bernard, 2023).

5. Discussion

The results of this paper illustrate how an identity crisis problematizes identity formation in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and, subsequently, show that this phenomenon anchors the paper rather than being an aside resulting from one of the romantic or social conflicts in the book. Through the lens of Freud's theory, the novel shows how broken and vacillating identities are a result of repressed childhood trauma, unfulfilled desires, and the unconscious. It is not the emotional suffering that Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff endure that is the problem; rather, it is the identity integration that forms the core problem of identity integration failure, stemming from psychological deprivation in the early years of life (Asl, 2014a; Gao, 2006).

Heathcliff's identity formation, above all, is a product of erratic social placement and the social construct of otherness. The instability of his socio-emotional identity, in conjunction with other social and psychological exclusion, has led to an identity formation that is centered deeply around unresolved child trauma and identity/civil aggression. Heathcliff's paralyzing revenge that he lingers on is necessary to know (Al-Hasani, 2023; Asl, 2014a). Heathcliff's unresolved revenge is one social trauma taken and reproduced to gain identity and dominance through revenge. Having



integration and separation of identity, Heathcliff is trapped in the unresolved trauma of his child's/emotional identity fragmentation.

Catherine's social crisis, however, is identity-wise tilted and is a social phenomenon of exclusion, showing how a crisis misses internal identity integration. Her social and emotional division shows social ambition, emotional struggle, and authenticity, narrating the unresolved problem of a split between inner civil identity and core social civil identity. Catherine cannot balance her emotional attachment to Heathcliff and her social desire to stabilize her mental health. Psychoanalytic thought claims her mental fragmentation is ego consolidation when she states, "I am Heathcliff," indicating that she does not have an inner sense of self, a coherent, intact self, or self-confidence (Bernard, 2023; Mamgain et al., 2025).

Catherine and Heathcliff's relationships, like the others', have the opposite effect on their inner sense of self. These characters have an emotionally bonded, toxic symbiosis in which individual self and mutual detachment become nonexistent. Edgar and Isabella Linton have interdependent social and emotional relationships, in which Linton serves as a social identity, and Isabella experiences identity loss; however, social identity does not form from restricted desire, and emotional identity is an illusion (Gao, 2006; Clavería Benabarre, 2025). These characters relationships

This paper aims to fill a gap in the literature by focusing on how the identity crisis functions as an organizing principle that integrates character psychology, social embedding, and plot, drawing on the frameworks of psychoanalysis, trauma studies, and Gothic criticism (McBride, 2017; Lin & Zhu, 2017).

6. Conclusion

This research analyzed *Wuthering Heights* to examine the crisis of identity through a Freudian psychoanalytic lens. The results show that both the novel's main characters, Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff, are broken and lack a coherent identity. Unconscious desires, traumatic memories from childhood, and repression destabilize their identities. By analyzing the socio-psychological ramifications of the identity crisis, this research demonstrates the factors of early environment, emotional neglect, and social isolation that negatively impact the adult's identity formation. Catherine's identity is distorted and fragmented by the horizontal pressure of the Internal conflict on an instinctive desire and social façade, while the vertical exclusion and repetition of trauma constructs Heathcliff's identity. Their dysfunctional love further exemplifies the vicious cycle in which identity crises become even further fragmented rather than repaired.



This identity crisis also draws from the individual and the story's constructed relationships. Using the techniques of doubling, othering, and Gothic symbols, Brontë portrays identity as psychologically troublesome and relationally absent. With this in mind, *Wuthering Heights* goes against its own philosophy of identity as a relational, stably constructed, and deeply rational self.

This research further extends existing scholarship in the field by resolving the crisis of identity as the primary foundational nexus, focusing on the novel's psychoanalysis, trauma, and gothic elements. These findings emphasize the continued importance of *Wuthering Heights* in contemporary conversations of identity, internal psychological struggles, and the boundaries of self-integration.

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