



AN ANALYSIS OF THE OBSESSIVE LOVE IN WUTHERING HEIGHTS BY EMILY BRONTE: AN ANXIOUS-AMBIVALENT ATTACHMENT APPROACH

Feby Lorentia Br Barus¹, Bertova Simanihuruk²

^{1,2} Universitas Katolik Santo Thomas, Medan, Indonesia

Email : febylorentiabarus@gmail.com, bertovasimanihuruk@yahoo.co.id

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the portrayal of obsessive love in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* and to identify the underlying factors that shape and influence its intensity. This research employs a qualitative method, with data collection conducted through close and comprehensive reading of the novel, selecting relevant textual evidence, examining concepts and theories related to attachment, and eliminating irrelevant data. The selected data are analyzed using John Bowlby's attachment theory, particularly the concept of anxious-ambivalent attachment. This study demonstrates that obsessive love is not merely a form of romantic expression but a psychological response shaped by early attachment experiences. The findings highlight the importance of attachment theory in understanding extreme emotional behavior and destructive romantic relationships in literary works.

Keywords: Obsessive love, attachment, anxious-ambivalent

1. Introduction

Love is a universal theme that has been extensively explored across disciplines such as literature, psychology, sociology, and cultural studies. In literary works, love is not always portrayed as a healthy or harmonious emotion; instead, it is often represented in extreme forms marked by emotional intensity, dependency, and psychological conflict. Such representations are significant because literary texts do not merely reflect aesthetic values but also offer insights into complex human emotional experiences. One notable example of a literary work that presents love in its most intense and destructive form is *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brontë, a novel that continues to invite interdisciplinary analysis due to its emotional depth and psychological complexity.

Previous studies on *Wuthering Heights* have approached the novel from various perspectives, including romanticism, social class, gender relations, and general psychological interpretations. While these studies provide valuable insights, many of them tend to describe

obsessive love as a product of individual temperament, social oppression, or traumatic life events without systematically explaining how early emotional experiences shape relational behavior in adulthood. As a result, the psychological roots of obsessive love are often discussed in a fragmented manner, leaving a gap in understanding the developmental processes that underlie such intense emotional attachment.

This study addresses that gap by examining obsessive love in *Wuthering Heights* through the lens of attachment theory proposed by John Bowlby. Attachment theory emphasizes the significance of early caregiving experiences in forming internal working models that influence emotional regulation and relationship patterns throughout life. In particular, this research focuses on the anxious-ambivalent attachment style, which is characterized by emotional insecurity, fear of abandonment, and excessive dependency in close relationships. This framework allows obsessive love to be understood not merely as an exaggerated



emotion but as a psychological pattern rooted in unmet attachment needs.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how obsessive love is represented in *Wuthering Heights* and to identify the underlying factors that contribute to its intensity and persistence. By applying the anxious-ambivalent attachment framework, this research seeks to explain obsessive love as a continuation of early attachment disturbances, including inconsistent caregiving, anxiety over emotional loss, and prolonged emotional dependency. Through this approach, the study offers a more structured and theoretically grounded explanation of obsessive love in literary representation.

The novelty of this research lies in its systematic application of anxious-ambivalent attachment theory to literary analysis. Rather than treating obsessive love solely as a narrative device or emotional excess, this study positions it as a developmental phenomenon shaped by long-term psychological processes. This interdisciplinary approach bridges literary studies and developmental psychology, demonstrating how attachment theory can be effectively employed to deepen the interpretation of emotional relationships in literary texts.

Overall, this study contributes to both literary criticism and psychological discourse by providing a comprehensive framework for understanding obsessive love in literature. It offers literary scholars a psychological model for characterizing intense emotional bonds, while also illustrating for psychologists how literary narratives can serve as rich representations of human attachment experiences. By integrating insights from both fields, this research aims to be accessible and meaningful to scholars across disciplines.

2. Concepts and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Obsessive Love

Obsessive love is a psychological condition in which romantic attachment becomes excessive, overwhelming, and emotionally consuming. Rather than

functioning as a source of mutual support and emotional balance, obsessive love is marked by an intense fixation on the loved object, accompanied by emotional dependency and an inability to regulate feelings independently. Individuals experiencing obsessive love often perceive their romantic partner as the central source of meaning, security, and emotional survival, leading to a loss of personal boundaries and emotional autonomy.

In many cases, obsessive love is driven not by affection alone, but by deep emotional insecurity and fear of emotional loss. The individual becomes emotionally preoccupied with maintaining closeness, often responding to perceived threats of separation with anxiety, anger, or despair. Such emotional patterns reveal that obsessive love is less about romantic fulfillment and more about psychological survival. In literary works, obsessive love frequently manifests as destructive passion, where emotional intensity overrides moral judgment, social norms, and self-control.

In *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff's love for Catherine exemplifies obsessive love in its most extreme form. His emotional attachment to Catherine transcends conventional romantic affection and evolves into a psychological obsession that defines his identity. Heathcliff does not merely love Catherine; he perceives her as an inseparable part of his existence. His inability to accept emotional separation, even after her death, illustrates how obsessive love operates as a compulsive emotional state rather than a healthy romantic bond. This obsessive dimension of love becomes the central emotional force that shapes Heathcliff's actions and psychological development throughout the novel.

2.2 Attachment Theory

This study is grounded in Attachment Theory developed by John Bowlby, which emphasizes the significance of early emotional bonds between children and their caregivers. Bowlby argues that attachment is a biologically rooted behavioral system



designed to ensure survival through emotional closeness and protection. Through consistent and responsive caregiving, children develop a sense of emotional security that allows them to explore the world and regulate their emotions effectively.

However, when caregiving is inconsistent, emotionally neglectful, or unstable, children may fail to develop secure attachment patterns. According to Bowlby, such early attachment disruptions result in insecure attachment styles that persist beyond childhood. These early experiences shape internal working models mental representations of the self and others that guide expectations, emotional responses, and relationship behaviors in later life. As a result, attachment patterns established in childhood often continue into adulthood and influence romantic relationships.

In *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff's early life is marked by emotional instability, neglect, and lack of consistent care. These experiences prevent the formation of a secure attachment base, leaving him emotionally vulnerable and dependent on external attachment figures for emotional validation. Attachment Theory provides a psychological framework for understanding how Heathcliff's childhood experiences shape his emotional development and contribute to his maladaptive romantic attachment in adulthood.

2.3 Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment

Anxious-ambivalent attachment is a form of insecure attachment characterized by heightened emotional sensitivity, anxiety in relationships, and intense fear of abandonment. Individuals with this attachment style often experience uncertainty regarding the availability and reliability of love from attachment figures. As a result, they develop a strong need for reassurance and emotional closeness, while simultaneously experiencing emotional instability and insecurity.

This attachment style typically develops in response to inconsistent

caregiving, where emotional support is provided unpredictably. Because caregivers are sometimes responsive and sometimes absent, individuals with anxious-ambivalent attachment become hypervigilant toward signs of rejection or separation. They tend to interpret emotional distance as abandonment and respond with excessive emotional reactions. In romantic relationships, this often manifests as possessiveness, jealousy, emotional dependency, and difficulty coping with separation.

Heathcliff's emotional relationship with Catherine strongly reflects the characteristics of anxious-ambivalent attachment. His intense emotional dependence on Catherine, combined with his inability to tolerate emotional distance, demonstrates a persistent attachment anxiety. Heathcliff's emotional instability, extreme jealousy, and fixation on Catherine's presence indicate that his love is driven by fear of loss rather than emotional security. His anxious attachment transforms romantic love into an emotionally obsessive bond that dominates his psychological life.

2.4 Factors Influencing Obsessive Love

This study identifies four major factors, derived from Attachment Theory, that contribute to the development of Heathcliff's obsessive love for Catherine. The first factor is inconsistent caregiving, which forms the foundation of Heathcliff's insecure attachment. The absence of stable emotional care during his childhood creates a deep sense of emotional uncertainty and vulnerability. Without a secure attachment base, Heathcliff becomes emotionally dependent on a single attachment figure to fulfill his unmet emotional needs.

The second factor is fear of abandonment, which emerges as a direct consequence of insecure attachment. Heathcliff's emotional reactions throughout the novel reveal a persistent fear of emotional loss. Any perceived threat to his bond with Catherine triggers intense emotional responses, including anger, despair, and psychological distress. This



fear drives his obsessive need to maintain emotional closeness and control.

The third factor is emotional overinvolvement and dependency, which reflects Heathcliff's inability to establish emotional independence. His emotional identity becomes inseparable from Catherine, leading him to prioritize their bond above all other aspects of life. This dependency intensifies his obsessive love, as emotional separation becomes psychologically unbearable. The fourth factor is the continuity of attachment from childhood to adulthood, which explains how Heathcliff's early attachment insecurity persists and evolves into obsessive romantic attachment. His unresolved childhood attachment needs are transferred into his adult relationship with Catherine, reinforcing the intensity of his emotional fixation.

Together, these four factors demonstrate that Heathcliff's obsessive love is not a spontaneous emotional phenomenon but the result of long-term psychological development shaped by insecure attachment experiences.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study applies Attachment Theory, with a specific focus on anxious-ambivalent attachment, to analyze Heathcliff's obsessive love for Catherine in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. This framework emphasizes the continuity between childhood attachment experiences and adult romantic behavior. By examining Heathcliff's emotional development through textual evidence, this study interprets his obsessive love as a psychological outcome of unresolved attachment insecurity.

Within this framework, Heathcliff's inconsistent caregiving experiences are identified as the root cause of his insecure attachment. These experiences generate fear of abandonment, emotional dependency, and heightened attachment anxiety, which collectively shape his obsessive romantic behavior. The framework allows for a systematic analysis of how emotional

trauma from childhood is transferred into adult romantic relationships, resulting in obsessive love.

By using Attachment Theory as the primary analytical lens, this study moves beyond a purely romantic or moral interpretation of Heathcliff's love. Instead, it presents obsessive love as a psychological condition shaped by anxious-ambivalent attachment, offering a deeper understanding of Heathcliff's emotional complexity and psychological motivation within the narrative of *Wuthering Heights*.

3. Method

This study applies a qualitative descriptive research method within a library-based research design. The qualitative approach is chosen because the research focuses on interpreting meanings, emotional conditions, and psychological patterns reflected in a literary text rather than measuring numerical data. This method allows for an in-depth exploration of Heathcliff's obsessive love as portrayed in *Wuthering Heights*, particularly through the lens of anxious-ambivalent attachment theory proposed by John Bowlby.

The primary source of data in this research is Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights*. The novel is treated as a psychological and literary text in which characters' behaviors, emotions, and relationships function as meaningful data. The primary data consist of words, phrases, dialogues, narrative descriptions, and character expressions that reveal Heathcliff's emotional dependence, fear of loss, possessiveness, and obsessive attachment to Catherine Earnshaw. These textual elements are selected because they directly represent Heathcliff's attachment behavior and emotional instability throughout the narrative.

Secondary data are obtained from academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and relevant scholarly sources that discuss attachment theory, anxious-ambivalent attachment, obsessive love, and psychological approaches to literature, as well as critical studies related to *Wuthering*



Heights. These sources are used to strengthen the theoretical foundation of the analysis and to support interpretations of the primary text.

The data collection process is conducted through close reading of the novel. During this process, the researcher carefully reads the text multiple times to identify passages that indicate Heathcliff's attachment patterns and obsessive emotional responses. The selected data are then documented and categorized based on the four factors that influence obsessive love in this study: inconsistent caregiving, fear of abandonment, emotional overinvolvement and dependency, and the continuity of attachment from childhood to adulthood. This categorization helps maintain a systematic structure in the analysis and ensures consistency with the research focus.

In analyzing the data, this study employs a thematic analysis technique. Each quotation is examined by relating Heathcliff's thoughts, emotions, and actions to the characteristics of anxious-ambivalent attachment as explained by Bowlby. The analysis emphasizes how Heathcliff's early childhood experiences, particularly the absence of stable emotional care, shape his attachment style and continue to influence his romantic relationship with Catherine in adulthood. The interpretation focuses on identifying recurring emotional patterns such as anxiety, emotional insecurity, dependency, and obsession.

The analytical process is conducted in a descriptive-analytical manner, meaning that each finding is first described based on the textual evidence from the novel and then explained using attachment theory. The study does not aim to judge the moral behavior of the character but to understand the psychological mechanisms underlying Heathcliff's obsessive love.

To ensure the credibility of the findings, this research applies theoretical triangulation by comparing interpretations of the novel with established psychological theories and supporting academic literature. This approach helps reinforce the validity of the analysis and ensures that the

interpretations remain grounded in recognized theoretical concepts. The results of the study are presented in a clear and systematic narrative form to show how anxious-ambivalent attachment contributes to the intensity and persistence of Heathcliff's obsessive love.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Results

This research investigates Heathcliff's obsessive love toward Catherine Earnshaw in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* by applying John Bowlby's Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment Theory. Through qualitative textual analysis, the findings demonstrate that Heathcliff's obsessive love is not a purely romantic phenomenon but a psychological condition rooted in insecure attachment formed during childhood and sustained throughout adulthood.

The results reveal that Heathcliff exhibits the defining characteristics of anxious-ambivalent attachment, such as emotional instability, intense fear of abandonment, excessive dependency, and difficulty regulating emotions in intimate relationships. These traits are consistently reflected in his thoughts, actions, and emotional expressions toward Catherine.

More specifically, the study identifies four major factors contributing to Heathcliff's obsessive love: (1) inconsistent caregiving during childhood, (2) persistent fear of abandonment, (3) emotional overinvolvement and dependency, and (4) continuity of insecure attachment from childhood into adulthood. These factors interact dynamically, intensifying Heathcliff's emotional fixation on Catherine and shaping his destructive behavior.

Rather than experiencing love as mutual affection, Heathcliff experiences it as an emotional necessity. Catherine becomes his sole attachment figure, leading to obsessive longing, emotional possessiveness, and psychological distress when separation occurs. The results confirm that Heathcliff's love aligns closely with the anxious-ambivalent attachment pattern described in attachment theory.



4.2 Discussion

1. Inconsistent Caregiving and the Development of Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment

One of the most significant findings of this research is that Heathcliff's obsessive love originates from inconsistent caregiving during his formative years. Heathcliff enters the Earnshaw household as an orphan without familial identity, social status, or emotional security. Although Mr. Earnshaw initially offers protection and affection, this care is unstable and short lived. Following Mr. Earnshaw's death, Heathcliff experiences severe emotional neglect, degradation, and abuse under Hindley Earnshaw's control.

According to Bowlby, children require consistent emotional responsiveness from caregivers to develop a secure attachment. When caregiving is unpredictable or inconsistent, children are unable to trust emotional availability, leading to anxiety and emotional hyperactivation. Heathcliff's childhood reflects this condition precisely. He never develops a stable emotional foundation, resulting in chronic insecurity and emotional vulnerability.

This lack of consistent care causes Heathcliff to cling intensely to Catherine, who represents the only source of emotional warmth and acceptance in his childhood. Consequently, his later obsessive attachment to Catherine can be understood as a compensatory response to early emotional deprivation. This finding reinforces Bowlby's argument that early attachment experiences fundamentally shape emotional patterns in later relationships.

2. Fear of Abandonment and Emotional Hyperactivation

The analysis further demonstrates that fear of abandonment is a core component of Heathcliff's obsessive love. Throughout the novel, Heathcliff exhibits extreme emotional distress at the prospect of separation from Catherine. Her decision to marry Edgar Linton is experienced by Heathcliff not simply as romantic rejection but as an existential loss.

Attachment theory explains that individuals with anxious-ambivalent attachment tend to exaggerate threats of abandonment and respond with heightened emotional reactions. Heathcliff's responses intense jealousy, despair, rage, and obsessive longing illustrate this emotional hyperactivation. His inability to accept Catherine's independence or emotional distance indicates a deep-seated fear of emotional abandonment.

This fear drives Heathcliff to perceive love as possession rather than partnership. His obsession is fueled by anxiety rather than affection, transforming emotional attachment into psychological dependency. As a result, Heathcliff's love becomes destructive, harming both himself and those around him.

3. Emotional Overinvolvement and Identity Fusion

Another important result is Heathcliff's emotional overinvolvement with Catherine, which manifests as identity fusion. Heathcliff repeatedly defines his existence in relation to Catherine, suggesting that he lacks a stable sense of self independent of her presence. His declaration that Catherine is his soul illustrates the depth of this emotional enmeshment.

Anxious-ambivalent attachment is often characterized by blurred emotional boundaries and excessive reliance on a romantic partner for self-worth and emotional regulation. Heathcliff's emotional dependency reflects this pattern, as he relies entirely on Catherine for emotional stability and validation.

This overinvolvement prevents the development of healthy relational boundaries and mutual respect. Heathcliff does not recognize Catherine as an autonomous individual with separate desires; instead, he perceives her as an emotional anchor essential to his survival. Consequently, love becomes obsessive, as emotional separation is perceived as emotional annihilation.



4. Continuity of Insecure Attachment from Childhood to Adulthood

The findings also confirm the continuity of insecure attachment patterns from childhood into adulthood. Bowlby emphasizes that attachment styles tend to persist across the lifespan unless modified by corrective emotional experiences. In Heathcliff's case, no such corrective experiences occur. Instead, his emotional wounds are repeatedly reinforced through rejection, social exclusion, and loss.

Heathcliff's adult relationships replicate the same attachment anxiety present in his childhood. His inability to form healthy emotional bonds, his fixation on Catherine even after her death, and his continued emotional suffering demonstrate the persistence of insecure attachment.

This continuity explains why Heathcliff remains trapped in emotional obsession and unable to achieve psychological healing. His attachment anxiety governs his emotional responses throughout his life, confirming Bowlby's theoretical assertion regarding attachment stability.

5. Obsessive Love as a Psychological Outcome of Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment

Overall, the discussion establishes that Heathcliff's obsessive love is best understood as a psychological manifestation of anxious-ambivalent attachment rather than as romantic devotion. His emotional patterns—fear, dependency, possessiveness, and emotional volatility align closely with attachment theory's description of insecure attachment.

Emily Brontë's portrayal of Heathcliff provides a compelling literary representation of attachment-related pathology. Despite being written in the nineteenth century, *Wuthering Heights* illustrates psychological dynamics that align with modern attachment theory. Heathcliff's obsession demonstrates how unresolved childhood trauma can distort adult intimacy and transform love into emotional suffering.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined Heathcliff's obsessive love toward Catherine Earnshaw in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* through the theoretical framework of Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment Theory proposed by John Bowlby. By employing qualitative textual analysis, this research demonstrates that Heathcliff's love cannot be understood merely as intense romantic passion, but rather as a psychological manifestation of insecure attachment shaped by early emotional experiences and sustained throughout his life.

The findings of this study reveal that Heathcliff exhibits the core characteristics of anxious-ambivalent attachment, including emotional instability, excessive dependency, fear of abandonment, and difficulty regulating emotions in intimate relationships. These characteristics are consistently reflected in his interactions with Catherine, as well as in his emotional responses to separation, rejection, and loss. Heathcliff's love is driven not by mutual affection or emotional balance, but by anxiety and emotional insecurity.

This research identifies four major factors that contribute to Heathcliff's obsessive love: inconsistent caregiving during childhood, persistent fear of abandonment, emotional overinvolvement and dependency, and the continuity of insecure attachment from childhood into adulthood. These factors are deeply interconnected and collectively shape Heathcliff's emotional world. The absence of consistent emotional care in his early life prevents the formation of a secure attachment, leading Heathcliff to rely excessively on Catherine as his sole attachment figure. As a result, love becomes a source of emotional survival rather than emotional growth.

Furthermore, the study confirms Bowlby's theoretical assertion that attachment patterns tend to persist across the lifespan when no corrective emotional experiences occur. Heathcliff's unresolved childhood trauma is repeatedly reinforced by social rejection, emotional loss, and



unfulfilled intimacy, causing his anxious attachment to remain stable into adulthood. His continued obsession with Catherine, even after her death, illustrates the depth of his attachment anxiety and the permanence of his emotional fixation.

From a literary perspective, this study demonstrates that *Wuthering Heights* presents a complex psychological portrayal of obsessive love that aligns closely with modern attachment theory. Emily Brontë's characterization of Heathcliff offers a powerful depiction of how emotional deprivation and insecure attachment can distort love, transforming it into obsession and emotional suffering. The novel thus serves not only as a work of romantic fiction but also as a rich text for psychological and interdisciplinary literary analysis.

In conclusion, this research contributes to literary studies by highlighting the relevance of attachment theory in analyzing emotional relationships in classic literature. By applying the anxious-ambivalent attachment framework, this study provides a deeper understanding of Heathcliff's obsessive love and emphasizes the lasting impact of childhood attachment experiences on adult emotional relationships. Future research may further explore attachment styles in other literary characters or apply comparative approaches to deepen the discussion of psychological attachment in literature.

References

Bachert, A. (n.d.). Ambivalent attachment style: How it affects relationships.

Rula.

<https://www.rula.com/blog/ambivalent-attachment-style/>

Bal, P. M., & Veltkamp, M. (2013). How does fiction reading influence empathy? An experimental investigation on the role of emotional transportation. *PLOS ONE*, 8(1), e55341.

<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0075810>

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Bowlby, J. (1980). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 3. Loss, sadness and depression*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Brontë, E. (2003). *Wuthering Heights*. London: Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1847)

Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. R. (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52(3), 511–524.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.52.3.511>

Wang, X. (2023). *An analysis of attachment anxiety in literary characters: A psychological approach*. Atlantis Press.

<https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.230403.105>

Verywell Mind. (n.d.). *Anxious attachment style: Causes, signs, and impact on relationships*.

<https://www.verywellmind.com/anxious-attachment-style-5077016>