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# Death or Punishment: Responding to the Byronic Hero in the Novels of Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA Dissertation

Author: Ivette Constans Renco

Supervisor: David Owen

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística

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## Abstract

“Mad, bad, and dangerous to know”  
Catherine Lamb, in reference to Byron, 1812<sup>1</sup>

The above quotation, attributed to Catherine Lamb, is perhaps the most famous remark referring to the character of Byron, who influenced Romantic literature through the introduction of the so-called Byronic hero. This is a figure that fuses great attributes with dark qualities, consequently generating an intensively seductive personality that furthers the readers' fascination for Byron's outlaw. Among the writers inspired by the Byronic hero, there are the three Brontë sisters, Emily, Charlotte, and Anne. As Harold Bloom argues, “between them, the Brontës can be said to have invented a relatively new genre, a kind of northern romance, deeply influenced both by Byron's poetry and by his myth and personality” (Bloom, 1961: 243).

The Brontës' works, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and *Jane Eyre* have previously been analysed in a myriad of ways, focusing on subjects such as feminism, magnanimity, and familiarity. Nevertheless, this dissertation aims to examine whether the female protagonists of these novels, Helen, Catherine, and Jane change their response to the repeated patterns of dangerous behaviour exhibited by the Byronic hero. I will argue that the intensity of attraction felt by a female character to this type of hero presages narrative tragedy of one kind or another, as the Byronic figure is incapable of selfless love, fosters destructive behaviours, and is often aggressively disdainful of standard social expectations.

Throughout this dissertation, then, I will carry out a close reading of the three novels, focusing initially on the different reactions of the female protagonists concerning the presence of the Byronic hero. Furthermore, I will also discuss the tragic nature of their attraction to their Byronic heroes and its fatal consequences. In order to do so, previous theoretical research on the different Byronic heroes and the three female protagonists will also be considered.

**Key Words:** *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Byronic hero, Emily Brontë, Charlotte Brontë, Anne Brontë, Jane Eyre, Edward Rochester, Catherine Earnshaw, Heathcliff, Helen Graham, Arthur Huntingdon, Romantic Literature, Female Response.

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<sup>1</sup> Although apocryphally attributed to Lamb (and she claimed the phrase as her own), there is no existing documentary evidence to support this attribution.



## **0. Introduction**

The “Romantic period” generally refers approximately to the years between 1785 and 1830 (Abrams, 1). During this era, George Gordon, better known as Lord Byron, provided his generation with a figure that earned the sympathies and admiration of many of his contemporaries, namely, the Byronic hero. Through his poetry, Byron was able to develop and expand his views by creating a hero who would stand up and fight restlessly for “what was good and true” (Marín, 1). Unlike what the name might suggest, the Byronic hero does not possess any classical heroic values. Although he may present great qualities, he also has darker hidden attributes. The Byronic hero is a powerful representation of ambition, self-sufficiency, and individualism; but he is also characterized by mysteriousness, gloominess, isolation, guilt, and superiority expressed through passion. By fusing these properties, Byron was able to generate a seductively intense poetic personality that furthered readers’ sympathy and fascination for his literary outlaws (and of course, for himself). Thus, the Byronic hero is considered attractive because of his extravagant self-realization and his rejection of society’s norms, despite his bitter nature and an inability to maintain conventional relationships with the rest of society.

Among the writers who found themselves fascinated by the Byronic hero, there are the three Brontë sisters, Charlotte (1816–1855), Emily (1818–1848), and Anne (1820–1849), although the three sisters were writing somewhat beyond the period of Romanticism. Byron’s influence on the sisters’ writing cannot be denied; Harold Bloom (8) argues: “them, the Brontës can be said to have invented a relatively new genre, a kind of northern romance, deeply influenced both by Byron's poetry and by his myth and

personality”. Notwithstanding this, the motive for the sisters’ interest in Lord Byron, who died in 1824 at thirty-six, when the sisters were only very young children, remains uncertain. Clearly, to give the obvious example, Emily’s youthful age did not prevent her or her writing from being profoundly affected by the romantic writer.

One of the reasons for their fascination could be linked to Byron's posthumous reputation, as the poet’s popularity increased even further after his death, therefore influencing and shaping the three sisters’ writings throughout their girlhood and womanhood (Bloom, 2). Nevertheless, other scholars attribute the Brontës’ fascination with Byron to a similarity in his behaviour to that of their brother, Branwell Brontë.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, it has sometimes been claimed that Branwell has served as an inspiration for the Byronic heroes displayed in his sisters’ novels.

According to Mogler, for example, “Branwell plays the part of the rebel in the Brontë Myth” (38). After being rejected by Mrs. Robinson, a married woman with whom he had an affair, Branwell becomes a domesticised version of the Byronic hero, at least in the Brontë household. He became self-destructively dependent on alcohol and opium, which ultimately led to his death. This behaviour deeply troubled his sisters, and because of this (or so it is argued), Branwell became an implicit model for the Byronic heroes that they created in their writing (55).

This study will focus on the three different Byronic heroes presented by the Brontë sisters in *Jane Eyre* (Charlotte: 1847), *Wuthering Heights* (Emily: 1847), and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (Anne: 1848). These characters are Mr Rochester, Heathcliff and Arthur Huntingdon, respectively. Specifically, I will assess the responses of the heroines towards

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to separate a work from its author. However, in the case of the Brontës, their depiction of Branwell in their novels seems to be more than coincidental. In spite of certain theoretical obstacles, it seems not unlikely that Branwell was at least part of inspiration for the masculine heroes in his sisters’ novels.

the Byronic hero. The reason I have chosen this topic, besides my love for the Brontë sisters' writing, is because of what I consider a *misinterpretation* of their work. According to a general view of these three writers, the Brontë novels are usually considered to be marriage-plot narratives and are consequently thought of as love stories by what might be termed *popular* readers, who give greatest attention to the end of the novel, that is, to its narrative resolution. Nevertheless, most of the Brontë novels present key issues in the central sections of their narratives that need to be contemplated and acknowledged, as they are as important as the resolution.

### **0.1 Literature Review**

The Brontë sisters' Byronic hero has been examined in great depth. In their novels, the intensity of attraction felt by a female protagonist to this hero presages narrative tragedy of one kind or another, as the Byronic figure is incapable of selfless love, fosters destructive behaviours, and is often aggressively disdainful of standard social expectations.

Sarah Wootton is one of the many scholars who address the Brontë sisters' cult interest in Byronism. In her study, *Byronic Heroes of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Literature* she argues that Charlotte and Emily Brontë are two of the main promoters of the romantic hero. They were able to give support to the intense interest in the Byronic hero by domesticizing this figure and creating a myth of heroic romance. Moreover, Wootton acknowledges the different perceptions of Byron among the sisters and how this influenced their writings. Wootton claims that Anne resists Romanticism and demystifies the cruelty of Charlotte's and Emily's Byronic heroes. Opposite to Emily and Charlotte, Anne's version of the Byronic hero is stripped of all glamour to reveal his corrupt charm.

Jennifer Patchen also deals with the different perceptions of Byronism in the novels of the Brontë sisters. In *A Conversation Among Sisters: The "Dangerous Lover" in the*

*Texts of the Brontës* (2009), Patchen addresses the perilous Byronic nature of Heathcliff, Mr. Rochester, and Arthur Huntingdon. However, she adds that each one of the Brontës created their model of a Byronic hero by appropriating the figure from Lord Byron and adapting it to their particular ideals. Furthermore, she mentions that the Brontës opened up the roles of heroines beyond the angel-demon paradigm by disassociating Byronism with the lover-redeemer heroine. Hence, the Brontës crafted their heroines in opposition to the Victorian canon, which promoted the idealization of morally *pure* women as ideal.

As for the study of the Byronic figures in the Brontë novels, Thormählen is responsible for one of the most extensive analyses of Arthur Huntingdon. Although Huntingdon is not analysed as a Byronic hero as such in *Aspects and Prospects of Arthur Huntingdon* (1993), the author examines Arthur's problematic behaviour and sexual appeal, which effectively derives from his Byronism. In her study, the author suggests his handsome appearance and charming attitude act as a tool to persuade women into unforgivable acts, at least according to Victorian society. Moreover, Thormählen refers to Arthur's self-destructive relationship with alcohol and other vices such as gambling, drawing a parallelism with Branwell Brontë.

As for Rochester, Marybeth Forina describes him as a new kind of Byronic hero in *Edward Rochester: A New Byronic Hero* (2014). In her study, Forina draws a comparison between Byron's prototypical heroes and Mr. Rochester. Although she confirms that both Byron and Charlotte's Byronic heroes are similar in appearance and attitude, Forina is able to establish a distinction through Mr. Rochester's repentance; for her, this is the difference between him and other Byronic heroes. Moreover, the author claims that Charlotte Brontë needed to create a new male hero to suit her changing female hero. To do so, Forina claims that the relationship between the heroine and the romantic hero requires equality, which is finally provided when Edward Rochester repents.

Heathcliff has been extensively analysed as a Byronic hero. A recent study by Teba Villar argues that he is influenced by Lord Byron. In *The “Byronic Hero” in Wuthering Heights* (2016), Heathcliff is described as a Byronic hero because of his “troubled past, emotional conflict, and self-destructive behaviour” (Villar, 5). Furthermore, Villar argues that Heathcliff’s own emotions provoke the destruction of the woman he is attracted to. At this point, the author discusses Catherine and Heathcliff’s relationships and describes their love as powerful enough to destroy their lives, causing them to never rest in peace until they meet again in the afterlife.

Although the Brontë’s Byronic heroes have been studied in considerable detail before, the change in reaction of their heroines towards the respective Byronic heroes of their novels has never previously been considered. This study therefore attempts to answer the question of whether there is a change in the authors’ responses (or at least in their narrative response) toward the Byronic lovers in these three novels.

The structure of this TFG will consist of three different chapters that focus respectively on the three novels analysed: *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Each chapter is divided into two sub-sections beginning with the Byronism of the hero, followed by how the narrative emphasizes his Byronic nature, and—finally—a central section that provides an analysis of the reaction of the heroines to the Byronic heroes of their stories. The first chapter will focus on *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*; the second will examine *Jane Eyre*, and the last chapter will consider on *Wuthering Heights*. The TFG closes with a conclusion that will set out the main findings of this brief study.

## Chapter 1: *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

### 1.1 The Byronic attitudes of Arthur Huntingdon

Arthur Huntingdon is considered to be the villain of Anne Brontë's second novel. He is said to be somewhat based on her brother, Branwell Brontë, and his tragic story. However, Arthur's death scene cannot be compared to Branwell's circumstances since he was still alive at the time the novel was written; nevertheless, it is said that Anne's brother might have been a source of inspiration for Arthur's proclivity to drink and involve himself in an affair (Bragg et al, 9:00)

The villain of *the Tenant of Wildfell Hall* evokes the appealing essence of the morally conflicted Byronic hero who defies social expectations. Notwithstanding this, differences found when comparing him to other Byronic heroes such as Heathcliff and Mr. Rochester make Arthur Huntingdon exceptional.

On the one hand, like the prototypical Byronic hero, Arthur Huntingdon presents a mix of good attributes and dark qualities. He is sophisticated, passionate, and merry, yet he is also irrational, uncontrollable, and self-destructive, a trait that is deeply connected to his lethal relationship with alcohol. Similarly to the effects that Charlotte and Emily's Byronic heroes cause, Arthur's sensual magnetism allows him to persuade and manipulate beautiful and intelligent women into committing indiscretions and infidelity (Thormählen, 833). In the novel, the antihero seduces Lady Lowborough/Annabella Wilmot into committing adultery, and manipulates Helen into kissing him before marriage, an act which was considered highly inappropriate at the time that the narrative occurs.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, his charming behaviour also fosters competition among women

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<sup>3</sup> Brontë locates this immediately prior to Victorianism, but the inappropriateness of the action would still be mostly the same.

who are constantly fighting for his attention, which, if not bestowed on them, leads women to feelings of self-consciousness, guilt, or obsession to regain his attention.

On the other hand, Arthur Huntingdon presents differences that make him an exceptional Byronic hero<sup>4</sup>. As Gruner claims, “Anne's own hero Arthur Huntingdon, mired in realism in pointed contrast to her sisters' Gothicism, emerges only as an abusive rake” (6). Thus, unlike Heathcliff and Rochester, Arthur Huntingdon is the only Byronic hero whose physical attractiveness is not based on gloominess or stern gestures. In fact, Anne's antihero beauty's is paralleled to a Greek sculpture.

In addition, contrary to the usual depiction of the romantic hero, Arthur is not described as an outsider to society nor does he want to isolate himself from the world. As depicted in the novel, Huntingdon is often surrounded by people in ballrooms and is always accompanied by his group of friends. Furthermore, he always respects social expectations in public, which contributes to his apparent image of the perfect gentleman, but one who hides his dangerous Byronic nature until Helen is married to him. Then, as Thormählen says, “fiendish traits and his actively corrupting influence becomes more and more accentuated” (837).

Unlike Mr Rochester or Heathcliff, Huntingdon does not abuse Helen physically. Instead, ss Senf notes, “he constantly submits her to verbal abuse and humiliation, flaunting his affairs, bringing his mistresses into the house...” (212). One example of this is Arthur's violation of intimacy when he ignores Helen's request to give her back her painting: “I insist upon having that back! It is mine, and you have no *right* to take it! Give it to me directly” (136).

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<sup>4</sup> Thormählen does not consider Arthur Huntingdon a Byronic hero, but rather a victim of the masculine ideals perpetuated by Victorian society. However, I disagree with this point of view: in my assessment, Huntingdon should not be given the excuse of being a victim. My reading of the novel is that he is obviously held accountable for his dark qualities and abusive behaviour.

## 1.2 Narrative indications of Arthur Huntingdon's Byronic nature

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne Brontë seeks to emphasize Arthur's Byronic essence through the narrative. As Gruner argues, Anne "leaves no enigma to his sins, cataloguing his debauchery in specific terms of adultery, alcoholism and abuse." (6). Thus, Brontë provides the reader with details that reveal Arthur's truest nature through gossip, advice given to Helen by her family and friends, and by contrasting Arthur to Gilbert.

Gossip plays an important role in this novel as it has, according to Hopkins, "all the power of speaking as opposed to writing" (725). Although Arthur's destructive personality is never explicitly addressed at the beginning of the novel, one can infer Arthur's passionate nature—directly connected to his Byronic personality—through the rumours spread about him. The first person spreading a rumour that emphasizes Arthur's Byronic nature is Helen's aunt, who tries to remind her niece of "that story about his intrigue with a married lady" (127). This "slandered accusation" (127) highlights Arthur's proclivity to break social rules by getting involved in love affairs and serves as a proof of his impassioned behaviour. Furthermore, his immoral nature is emphasized by the rumour overheard by Rachel, Helen's lady servant, who tells her that "they have said some things about Mr. Huntingdon" (170) referring to Arthur's alleged passionate traits that not only contribute to his reputation as a bad husband, but also point to his character as a Byronic hero.

Additionally, advice given to Helen through his aunt and friend also suggests that Arthur Huntingdon is a Byronic hero. First, the Maxwell matriarch seeks to protect her niece and warn the reader against Arthur's destructive nature and false gentlemanly image. Initially, she advises Helen not to trust Arthur and hopes to influence her choice by forewarning her "Oh Helen! Helen! You little know the misery of uniting your fortunes to such a man!" (128). By the same token, Millicent questions Helen's choice and



wonders “don’t you think his face is too red” (128) alluding to Arthur’s tendency towards drunkenness, closely linked to the self-destructive element that is typical of the Byronic hero.

Furthermore, the form of the narrative itself is evidence of Arthur’s Byronic figure. Due to being overwhelmed by Arthur’s drunken outbursts that start increasing in frequency, Helen writes in a private diary. This diary not only provides information about Arthur’s nature as a Byronic hero, its existence as a hidden and private diary hints at Arthur’s distrustful and abusive personality, which forces Helen into a self-confessional and private mode of discourse, although it also gives voice to her difficulties. As Senf reasons, by “speaking her forbidden range, she breaks out of her emotional prison” (212). Thus, the Bronte heroine is enabled to exhibit her rage and find freedom and refuge against her abusive husband inside the pages of her dear diary.

I have found relief in describing the very circumstances that have destroyed my peace, as well as the little trivial details attendant upon their discovery. No sleep I could have got this night would have done so much towards composing my mind, and preparing me to meet the trials of the day-I fancy so, at least; - and yet when I cease writing, I find my head aches terribly. (317)

Finally, when comparing Arthur Huntingdon to Gilbert Markham, Huntingdon’s Byronic nature is emphasized. Contrary to Arthur, and as Rothman states, Helen’s second husband seems to “stabilize the situation through his calm and cheerful approach towards both mother and son” (30). This difference between Arthur and Gilbert highlights Huntingdon’s Byronic nature since as a Byronic hero he does not bring stability, but torment. As Helen regrets, “from motives of mere idle egoism, is pleased to win himself; making no use of it but torment [her], and ruin the child” (325-6). As can be perceived, Arthur’s intention is to bring misery to his wife and son, in contrast to Markham’s intention to bring stability, actually highlights his Byronic nature.

### 1.3 Helen's response

Helen Graham, like many other female characters in the Brontë novels, cannot help but fall in love with the Byronic hero. However, despite her initial response to the Byronic hero being blind love, this will gradually change towards indifference; and once she accepts that his Byronic nature is unchangeable, it will make her reject him altogether.

Although Helen reassures Mrs. Maxwell by claiming that she “should think it wrong to marry a man that was deficient in sense or principle” (121), she fails her own standards as she is captivated by Arthur's merry temper and by his physical appeal. Thanks to Arthur's charming effects, Helen falls completely in love with him and thus she refuses to believe anything negative about his character. When forewarned by her aunt about his future husband's behaviour, Helen brushes her aunt's advice off as a mere exaggeration, claiming “I cannot believe there is any harm in those laughing blue eyes” (115).

In addition, at this initial stage in which she reacts positively towards her Byronic hero, Helen is constantly manipulated by Arthur into feeling jealousy, guilt, and self-consciousness, but she remains certain that she is Arthur's perfect match. At balls, Helen often feels threatened by Annabella's presence and is jealous when Arthur spends time with her: “the time and the manner of [Arthurs asking Annabella to dance], appeared like a gratuitous insult to me; and I could have wept with pure vexation” (140). Furthermore, after burning the painting that Arthur inspected without her consent, he withdraws his attention from Helen, an act of mental abuse, and manipulates her into thinking she is the one to blame. Feeling guilty, she justifies his actions: “he meant no harm- it was only his joyous, playful spirit; and I, by my acrimonious resentment- so serious, so disproportionate to the offence – have so wounded his feelings” (138). Finally, her self-consciousness manifests itself when Arthur does not pay attention to her; then she believes “He never could have loved me” (139). However, although feeling insecure in

that aspect, she acknowledges that she is a better match for him than Annabella, who Helen affirms, “will neither deplore his faults nor attempt their amendment, but rather aggravate it with her own” (138).

As Thormählen notes, “before they are married however, Helen has already realized that Arthur’s jocularly is gross and cruel, and that it is not balanced by even occasional hints of gravity” (832). Eventually, Helen notices Arthur’s cruel behaviour, but she does not reject him since she firmly believes that she is capable of changing Arthur’s attitude once she marries him.

Throughout her marriage, Helen changes her response to the Byronic hero from positive to indifference. Once Arthur starts exhibiting his Byronic nature through his retelling of his many affairs, Helen admits “If you had told me these things before, Arthur, I never should have given you a chance” (177). Helen starts recognizing that she does not like her husband’s Byronic values and regrets having married him. Nevertheless, her response to him does not change; it remains positive. She grows desperate in trying to change him and forces herself to be with him due to social pressure and her love for him. Therefore, she continues to suffer from her Byronic hero’s abuses that are now aggravated by Arthur’s jealousy for his own son and, of course, his drinking problems.

Nevertheless, Helen chooses indifference as a new response towards Arthur’s Byronic nature. According to Senf, Helen reaches a point at which she represses her emotions to confront Arthur’s abuse (210). When Helen learns “that his delight increased in proportion to [her] anger and agitations” (221), she responds with receiving “his revelations within the silence of calm contempt” (221). Therefore, Helen’s indifferent attitude is used as a passive response against the Byronic hero in order to protect her from his abuse and preserve her self-respect.

After her father's death, Helen starts changing her response towards the Byronic hero from indifference to rejection. She disapproves of Arthur's hurtful behaviour and refuses to play along with the agony he causes. Helen eventually decides to leave her husband after struggling unsuccessfully with his affairs and mental abuse (Carnell, 9). Discovering Huntingdon's final affair, Helen now realizes that Arthur cannot be saved. Once she accepts that, she breaks free from the manipulative effects of the Byronic hero and recognizes that "when I think of how fondly, how foolishly I have loved him, how madly I have trusted him, how constantly I have laboured, and studied, and prayed, and struggled for his advantage; and how cruelly he has trampled on my love ... I HATE him" (284). Here, Helen is not only stating that she does not love her husband, but is also responding aggressively to Arthur's Byronism and thus, rejecting the presence of the Byronic hero.

To summarise, Helen's response to the Byronic hero of her story, Arthur Huntingdon, changes from love, to indifference, and finally to rejection. Once the Brontë heroine rejects Arthur Huntingdon, she is able to break free from the torments that he inflicts on her. As Thormählen comments, once the Byronic hero burns himself out, his influence fades away (840).

## Chapter 2: *Jane Eyre*

### 2.1 The Byronic attitudes of Edward Rochester

Edward Rochester, the principal male character in Charlotte Brontë's second novel, *Jane Eyre*, has been deeply analysed as a prototypical Byronic hero. Contrary to her sisters' appropriation of their older brother to model their Byronic heroes, "Charlotte refused Branwell any part in the project, nor did he appear in her novels" (Quarm, 279). Thus, it can be inferred that the oldest Brontë sister took Byron's antihero as a model to suit her heroine (Forina, 87). Certainly, his unflattering yet alluring appearance, self-destructive and passionate behaviour, arrogance, and inability to respect and adhere to religious and social laws make Rochester a Byronic hero.

Like the prototypical Byronic hero, Edward Rochester has an unattractive appearance that nevertheless allures women. Initially, when Jane meets his master for the first time, she describes him as having a "dark face, with stern features and a heavy brow" (120). Moreover, when he asks her opinion of his physical appearance, Jane openly admits that she does not find him handsome (137).

Moreover, similarly to Heathcliff and Huntingdon, Rochester presents a self-destructive behaviour typical of the romantic hero by undermining his happiness. As can be seen throughout the novel, Edward Rochester rejects Blanche Ingram as his ideal type of wife by dismissing "women who only please me with their faces" and professing his love for "the soul made of fire, and the character that bends but does not break" (230). Nevertheless, when Rochester starts objectifying Jane and treating her as Blanche Ingram, threatening her identity, he is sabotaging himself since his self-destructive behaviour forces him to turn Jane into a woman with whom he will never be happy (Hanley, 12).

Furthermore, this self-destructive strategy is repeated when Mr. Rochester attempts to transform the governess into someone similar to his concealed wife, Bertha Mason, whom he despised. Thus, by persuading Jane into illegally being Mrs. Rochester “both virtually and nominally”, and essentially, into becoming his mistress, Rochester asks Jane to be “intemperate and unchaste” (261), which is exactly what he loathed Bertha for.

In addition, Mr. Rochester’s arrogance, and his inability to act suitably at either a social or moral level, also portray him as a Byronic hero. As Nancy Pell argues, Mr Rochester plays the role of the master not only with servants but also with men and women (82). In the novel, Rochester exhibits an authoritarian attitude towards his ward, but also toward Mr Mason. By the same token, he thinks of himself as above the law, emphasizing his Byronism, since he adheres to neither social nor religious constraints. First, Rochester attempts to marry Jane while legally still being married to Bertha. This marriage between Jane and Rochester would have never been legal, that is clear; however, Rochester is either ignorant of that fact (which is not possible) or else seeks to put himself above the constraints of social and religious law. When confronted by the church, he acknowledges arrogantly that he meant to be a bigamist until he was discovered, “Bigamy is an ugly word! —I meant, however, to be a bigamist: but fate has outmanoeuvred me, or Providence has checked me” (288).

Although Forster (86-87) argues that Mr. Rochester’s repentance and guilt make him an exceptional Byronic hero, it is actually his capacity for redeeming himself and erasing his Byronic nature that makes him a special Byronic hero. Contrary to Huntingdon and Heathcliff, Rochester is the only Byronic hero in the Brontë novels who redeems himself, eliminating the typical Byronic character by exhibiting a selfless nature during the fire

when he confronts the consequences of his sin; to marry Bertha for lust and then trapping her in an attic.

## 2.2 Narrative indications of Rochester's Byronic nature

*Jane Eyre* is a novel that embodies the aesthetics of 19th-century literature, displaying themes that were highly representative of the early Victorian<sup>5</sup> period. Among them, Gothicism and nature are said to be two of the major themes that characterize Mr. Rochester's personality. Furthermore, considering Mr. Rochester is made known only through Jane's point of view, nature and Gothicism seek to help the reader to identify Mr. Rochester's Byronic personality and warn against the toxic effects he bestows on those who fall for him.

First, the natural elements and phenomena in Brontë's novel highlight Rochester's Byronism by alluding to the romantic hero's passionate, dangerous, and destructive behaviour. In her novel, Brontë refers to fire to allude to Jane's feelings, as an end of the rational spectrum and as a symbol of love (Roth, 10). However, fire also hints at Rochester's Byronic essence as a passionate being. In the novel, Rochester's eyes are often described with a "strange fire in his look" (145), and as a "flaming glance" that is connected to the "glow of furnace" (301). By the same token, the descriptions of another part of his body and his relationship with Jane are also linked to fire. For instance, his hand is portrayed as a "hand of fiery iron [that] grasped my vitals" (299), and his relationship with Jane is said to be fused through a "pure, powerful flame" (299).

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<sup>5</sup> It might perhaps seem obvious at this stage, but the Brontës did not write their novels following the mid-C19-century current. Thus, the themes included in *Jane Eyre* are not purely Victorian, since Gothicism emerged in the late C18 and thus before the Victorian period. However, the movement revived throughout the C19 and was well-received by Victorian readers.

Hence, by using fire as a feature of Mr. Rochester, Brontë is also depicting him as a passionate being, hinting at him as a Byronic hero. Curiously, fire is also the element that perpetuates Rochester's Byronic downfall, stripping away traits like arrogance that made him a Byronic hero, and also allowing him the chance to repent.

Furthermore, continuing with natural imagery, the etymology of "Thornfield Park" might hint at Rochester's threatening nature. The Brontë sisters have been said to convey symbolic messages through names (Glen, 117). In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë attempts to warn the reader against Rochester by providing his house with a name that hints at his destructive behaviour. As Martin claims, "Mr. Rochester is his house" (90), thus, "Thornfield Park" takes some of its meaning from "thorn" which is that part of a plant that is small and sharp, capable of hurting. This can be compared to Rochester's behaviour: like a thorn, he has the power to hurt people as his nature is also destructive.

Secondly, Gothicism contributes to the image of Mr. Rochester as a Byronic hero. In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë shows Edward Rochester's Byronic nature through the gothic environment of his gloomy mansion and the madwoman that resides in his attic. One of the features that hints at Rochester's Byronism is the similarity between his house and Bluebeard's castle. Jane describes the third floor of his mansion as "narrow, low, dim, with only one little window at the far end, and looking, with its two rows of small black doors- all shut, like a corridor in some Bluebeard's castle" (93). By using this comparison, Brontë is attributing to Rochester the role of the dangerous abusive aggressor, since the locked women of Bluebeard's castle were all victims of rape.

The person who most clearly characterizes Gothicism in Thornfield Park is Bertha Mason, the madwoman in the attic. Bertha's presence has always been analysed as the representation of the 19th-century women who were silenced, but it has also been examined as a classic gothic symbol that announces to the readers that they are entering



into a distorted world. In the novel, her presence functions as a prophecy that reminds Jane of the consequences of being seduced by the irrevocable passions of the Byronic hero. As Martin claims, this effect is emphasized when Brontë displays Betha in her animality, which reminds Jane that she could also become the negative prototype of female sexuality (90).

### **2.3 Jane's response**

As Gilbert remarks, “we tend today to think of *Jane Eyre* as...the archetypical scenario for all those mildly thrilling romantic encounters between a scowling Byronic hero (who owns a gloomy mansion) and a trembling heroine (who can't quite figure out the mansion's floor plan)” (337). However, *Jane Eyre* should also be recognized as innovative as the author was the only one of her sisters who stripped the Byronism from her Byronic hero. This allowed the heroine to build a genuine love relationship with her lover, although Jane's response to the Byronic hero changes, from initially reacting positively to rejecting Rochester's Byronic nature completely.

At first, although recognizing the dark nature of the Byronic hero, Jane acts positively towards him. When Edward Rochester and Jane meet, she admits not finding him handsome. Nevertheless, soon after their first meeting together, the text shows evidence of Jane's early attraction toward her master. In the novel, Jane admits that “the ease of his manner freed me from painful restraint: the friendly frankness, as correct and cordial, with which he treated me, drew me to him” (174). In addition, Jane continues to react positively to the Byronic hero when she is under his effects. Similar to Helen Graham, Jane also experiences jealousy, and insecurity and seems to compete with Blanche Ingram for Rochester's affections. When Rochester confesses to having pretended to be engaged to Blanche Ingram, Jane admits having suffered “a bitter pain” (315). Moreover, Jane seems to think of herself as “plain” when compared to the “noble and beautiful” Blanche

Ingram, which hints at Jane's insecurity. Linked to this, Jane starts pointing out Blanche's flaws to demonstrate that she is a more appropriate partner for Rochester, suggesting that Blanche's "pride and self-complacency repelled further and further what she wished to allure" (159) and trusting that she could win Rochester's love: "Arrows that continually glanced off Mr. Rochester's breast...might, I knew, if shot by a surer hand...have called love into his stern eye" (159).

Additionally, because of acting positively under the Byronic hero's effects, Jane is manipulated into keeping a submissive role to maintain her relationship with Rochester. In the text, Jane refuses to be treated like Rochester's mistresses as she fears that being treated as a social equal to him might lead Rochester to think less of her (which is how he reacts to women in his social circle). Jane acknowledges to herself: "to become the successor of this poor girls, he would one day regard me with the same feeling which now in his mind desecrated [his former's mistress's] memory". So, to keep his affection, she rejects the role of the mistress and settles for the role of the employee, as she confirms that "I will not be your English Céline Varens. I shall continue to act as Adèle's governess" (323).

However, Jane's response towards the Byronic hero changes when Mr. Rochester starts threatening her individualism. As Hanley argues, Jane was educated by Miss Temple, who teaches her that it is acceptable to challenge masculine authority if it does not align with one's values (6). Following her teacher's advice, Jane confronts Rochester as her individualistic values are much more important than the love she feels for the Byronic hero. Thus, when he insists on changing her identity by buying her satin and jewels, she responds by refusing to wear his choice, admitting that "the more he bought me, the more my cheek burned with a sense of annoyance and humiliation" (321). Then, as Patchen claims, Jane totally rejects the Byronic hero when she refuses to save him,

repudiating the role of the love-redeemer (39). When Jane discovers Rochester's secret, the Byronic hero then acts as the love-redeemer figure to try to persuade her into staying with him against her values. To which Jane asserts, "I am not an angel...I will not become one until I die: I will be myself" (311), refusing to sacrifice herself for his lover.

Notwithstanding this, it cannot be denied that Jane is still under Rochester's Byronic effects, since she plainly loves him. After Jane decides to leave Rochester for the benefit of her self-respect, she admits to loving him "more than ever", but that "this is the last time that I [she] must express it" (365). Since Jane is still in love with him, the effects of the Byronic hero never cease (as in the case of Arthur or Heathcliff). In *Jane Eyre*, while the heroine remains in the Rivers' household, she hears a cry, more specifically, a "well-remembered voice – that of Edward Fairfax Rochester" (507) who seeks her help. Fortunately, after her return, Rochester and Jane can build a healthy relationship based on love, now that the fire has erased the Byronism from Mr Rochester.

## Chapter 3: *Wuthering Heights*

### 3.1 The Byronic Attitudes of Heathcliff

*Wuthering Heights* is the only novel that Emily Brontë wrote. However, it has gained its status as one of the major romantic works that still remains debatable to this day. One of the elements that contribute to both the novel's romantic status and its ongoing interest is Heathcliff, the Byronic hero of the story. His character is said to have been influenced by Brontë's brother,<sup>6</sup> Branwell, who shares considerable similarities with Emily Brontë's hero (Meer, 211-212). For instance, both Heathcliff and Branwell tend to obsess over women who are unattainable and then suffer in the most destructive way possible.

Heathcliff is one of the clearest examples of Byronic heroes in English literature. As it can be easily seen in Emily Brontë's novel, his Byronism is approached by means of his complex origin, his isolation, his dark yet alluring appearance, and his manipulative, passionate and destructive behaviour.

Unlike the cases of Rochester and Arthur, readers are given a vague idea of Heathcliff's Byronic origins. In the novel, Heathcliff is introduced during his childhood, which enables readers to see the physical and verbal abuse that he suffers from Hanley and from society during his time at the Heights. Nevertheless, his breaking point in the house is provoked by Catherine, who is set to marry Edgar Linton because of Edgar's economic and social position. As a result of this, Heathcliff decides to leave, but eventually returns as a Byronic hero ready to seek revenge "by using the very institutional powers that originally failed him" (Stein, 44).

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<sup>6</sup> Flintoff (324) and Miller (70) hypothesise that Branwell could have helped his sister to create the antihero and to write *Wuthering Heights*. This is because Branwell uses expressions in his poems that are directly comparable to the expressions that Heathcliff uses in Emily's novel.

Moreover, Heathcliff differs from the Byronic heroes introduced by Charlotte and Anne Brontë by presenting himself as an unsociable and isolated being. As Villar notes, Heathcliff chooses to distance himself from social life (8). In the novel, Heathcliff is depicted as a “solitary neighbour”, who lives in a place “completely removed from the stir of society” (1). In addition, he is also said to become irritated at the presence of people and that he is not very sociable.

Notwithstanding this, he shares certain similarities with the other Byronic heroes presented in the Brontës’ works such as his attractive yet dark appeal. In the novel, Heathcliff is first described as “dark-skinned gypsy” (3), “imp of Satan” (27) among other descriptions. However, when he returns to the Heights, he becomes unrecognizable as he now resembles a gentleman, yet some of his dark qualities are still visible: “[He] looked intelligent and retained no marks of former degradation. A half-civilised ferocity lurked yet in the depressed brows and eyes full of black fire, but it was subdued, and his manner was even dignified: quite divested of roughness, though too stern for grace” (69).

In addition, his passionate, destructive, and manipulative behaviour are additional elements that present Heathcliff as a prototypical Byronic hero. First, Heathcliff’s passionate behaviour is hinted at through Catherine’s perspective of him; she describes him as a “fierce, pitiless, wolfish man” (74). Moreover, his emotions are so intense that he is led to commit atrocious acts under the effects of jealousy. As can be seen in the novel, Heathcliff destroys the life of the Lintons as revenge for taking Catherine away from him.

### **3.2 Narrative indications of Heathcliff’s Byronic nature**

*Wuthering Heights* appears to provide evidence for the naturally gloomy imagination that Emily Brontë acquired from her childhood from reading Byron (Brown, 375). It is her love of nature, gloom and Byron that contributes to highlighting Heathcliff’s Byronic

nature through the gothic and natural elements included in her novel. In addition, by contrasting Edgar Linton to Heathcliff, his Byronism is emphasized.

Gothic elements have been exhaustively analysed in Brontë's novel, as Williams confirms, "the gothic strains of Romanticism have long been taken from granted in *Wuthering Heights*". In the novel, these dark elements serve as a tool to hint at Heathcliff's Byronic nature. One of the gothic elements that contribute to Heathcliff's Byronic depiction is the presence of Isabella Linton. As Quiao points out, *pure* women are key figures that highlight the brutality of the Byronic hero (1582). This is the case with Isabella Linton, a clueless, innocent woman who is trapped by the charming yet dangerous effects of Heathcliff. In the novel, although being warned against Heathcliff, Isabella soon realises that marrying a Byronic figure was not a good idea, as she writes to Nelly: "my heart returned to Thrushcross Grange in twenty-four hours" (149). This serves as a forewarning of what she will suffer by being the partner of this Byronic character, as she will be tormented, poisoned, and will die miserably, away from her beloved home. Therefore, her character and the suffering that she has gone through throw light onto the brutal and dangerous traits that Heathcliff possesses as a Byronic hero.

Furthermore, another gothic element that highlights Heathcliff's nature as a Byronic hero is the gloomy and dismal physical setting. In the novel, Lockwood observes the landscape and proceeds to explain the name of Heathcliff's house, clarifying that:

"Wuthering Heights is the name of Mr. Heathcliff's dwelling. 'Wuthering' is a significant provincial adjective, descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in stormy weather. Pure, bracing ventilation they must have up there, at all times, indeed: one may guess the power of the north wind, blowing over the edge." (26)

Therefore, the moors in *Wuthering Heights* are depicted as confusing, powerful, and dangerous, drawing a parallel between the environment and Heathcliff's passionate and uncontrollable behaviour, and so confirming his Byronic nature. In addition, the name of

the house in which he resides also suggest Heathcliff's Byronism. As with Thornfield Park, the etymology of "wuthering" also contributes to Heathcliff's Byronism (Hanger, 13). The adjective is used to describe a strong wind or a place in which wind blows strongly. Thus, the name points to Heathcliff's aggressive and often volatile behaviour, so typical of a Byronic hero.

Beyond etymology, this subliminal Byronism is also produced through aspects such as the weather. Apart from contributing to the dark scenery, as Tytler claims, the weather is a key factor in *Wuthering Heights* because it reveals aspects of some of the characters (40). In the novel, Heathcliff's feelings are often described as bolts of lightning and his Byronism comes to be represented through this. This natural phenomenon appears in key moments throughout the narrative. For instance, when Heathcliff disappears, a tree is struck by lightning and when Cathy decides to marry Edgar Linton there is an electric storm. Thus, the weather depicts Heathcliff's feelings, hinting at his aggressive and uncontrollable manner of responding to something that he does not approve of, this violent and irrepressible behaviour forming part of his Byronic nature. Moreover, the fact that these phenomena occur after Heathcliff becomes gravely upset could be understood as a presage of the dangerous consequences of hurting or betraying a Byronic hero.

### **3.3 Catherine's Response**

*Wuthering Heights* makes the interpretation of Catherine Earnshaw's response more complex, as the novel is narrated from Nelly's point of view. For this reason, readers are never fully able to understand Catherine or her response to the Byronic hero. However, one aspect is clear, as Hafley points out: Catherine Earnshaw is different to the other heroines depicted in the Brontë novels (202). And one of the aspects that distinguishes

her from Helen Graham/Huntingdon and Jane Eyre is her unchanging positive response to the Byronic hero of her story.

First, the initial interactions between Catherine and Heathcliff as children is essentially irrelevant to the analysis of Catherine's response to this romantic hero, since Heathcliff does not become a Byronic figure until he decides to come back to take revenge. Nevertheless, it is particularly important to analyse the kind of bond that they share as this will affect their whole relationship, as well as Catherine's subsequent response to Heathcliff as a Byronic figure.

As Hanger observes, Catherine and Heathcliff construct their early relationship through the similarities of their stormy and unruly personality (16). For this reason, they establish such a strong bond that it is paralleled to being a single soul, as Catherine acknowledges when she says: "But Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff" (88) and that "whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same" (87). This emotional connection represents a key factor that determines the relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff: from the moment they become friends to the moment they die, they will always perceive each other as a part of themselves, making it impossible to reject each other.

After Heathcliff reappears in Catherine's life as a Byronic hero, Catherine exhibits a highly positive response to him. She is ecstatic and becomes infatuated with him as she "kept her gaze at him as if she feared he would vanish were she to remove it" (103). In addition, her obsession with him rapidly increases, as she cannot contain herself from praising Heathcliff, and she infers that Edgar is "sick" (105) from hearing about Heathcliff. Notwithstanding this, her first positive response to this Byronic hero differs from those responses from Jane Eyre and Helen Graham. As Patchen argues: "Emily emphasizes the spirituality of Heathcliff and Cathy's relationship, sidestepping the



sexuality that her sisters invoke” (32). Thus, once Heathcliff is back in Wuthering Heights, Catherine is attracted to the Byronic hero emotionally, as she perceives Heathcliff as an extension of herself. However, she is also attracted to him physically as she appears to be infatuated with his appearance once he comes back to Wuthering Heights. This is noticed by Nelly, who emphasizes that “her [Catherine’s] gaze fixed on him as if she were feared he would vanish were she to remove it” (103), strongly suggesting that Catherine is also admiring Heathcliff’s physical attributes.

Nevertheless, as her reaction is positive throughout the whole novel, once Heathcliff is transformed into a Byronic hero, Catherine suffers the same effects as Charlotte and Anne’s heroines. Similar to Jane Eyre and Helen Graham, Catherine also exhibits jealous behaviour and seeks to compete for Heathcliff’s attention, as she derides Isabella’s presence when she is with Heathcliff, laughing: “it was no hint that your company was superfluous; we didn’t care whether you kept with us or not” (109). Additionally, she continues to discourage Isabella from pursuing Heathcliff by warning her of the dangerous consequences of being with someone like him, saying: “he’d crush you, like sparrow’s eggs, Isabella, if he found you a troublesome charge” (110).

Unlike other Brontë heroines, Catherine suffers the fatal consequences of reacting positively to the Byronic hero. As Brito claims, Heathcliff is the main cause of Catherine’s mental and physical pain (39), which will lead to her fatal ending. In the novel, Catherine is deeply affected by the toxic dynamics of her relationship with Heathcliff, and although her health improves after spending two months without seeing him, she provokes her own death by compulsively going back to her Byronic hero. Catherine allows Heathcliff to come to see her before she dies: “Catherine makes a spring” (174) and desperately embraces and kisses Heathcliff. After this, she agrees with

him that her death is the consequence of the suffering she has bestowed on him, crying: “If I’ve done wrong, I’m dying for it. It is enough” (175).

Finally, through *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë clearly delineates the fatal consequences for women who fall under the effects of the Byronic hero. As Patchen suggests, “to exist in counterpart to a Byronic hero is to be inherently at risk.” (9). Even those who could completely understand the heroes in their *Byronism*, such as Catherine Earnshaw, are never sufficiently protected from the heroes’ Byronic nature.

#### 4. Conclusions

To draw this TFG to a close, I will now briefly outline the main conclusions that I have drawn regarding the content of this study. This project has aimed to answer the research question proposed, which is whether the Brontë's heroines reveal changes in their reactions towards the Byronic hero. My study suggests that Jane Eyre and Helen Graham did indeed change their response towards the Byronic hero once their own values were deeply threatened by the Byronic behaviour of their lovers. However, this was not the case with Catherine Earnshaw, who actually makes no change in her reaction toward the Byronic hero. Unlike Helen and Jane, whose change provides them with a happier ending, Catherine's failure to recalibrate results in death.

Furthermore, my discussion has also highlighted how the narrative chooses different elements to emphasize the Byronic nature of Arthur Huntingdon, Edward Rochester, and Heathcliff. First, it seems that Arthur's Byronism is hinted at through rumours and in Helen's diary (a central element in *Tenant*), which allude to his passionate and abusive behaviour. In the case of Edward Rochester and Heathcliff, Gothicism and natural elements (central to *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*) play a key role in portraying their Byronic nature by hinting at these men's dangerous, unpredictable, abusive and tumultuous personalities.

Additionally, as the chapters in this TFG have suggested, Branwell Brontë seemed to be a great source of inspiration for the Byronic heroes found in the novels of the Brontë sisters. As Landham argues, "the sister's unruly characters are not simply created from their brother; they are created *as a response to* their brother" (4). Moreover, through the comparison of the Byronic heroes portrayed, it is possible to determine differences and similarities among the three male characters. On the one hand, they share traits such as

manipulativeness, self-destructiveness, and passionate behaviour. On the other hand, there are differences in the description of their origin and physical appearance, their abusive methods, and their relative capability to redeem themselves.

In short, this study suggests that each Brontë sister bestowed their heroes with distinct amounts of Byronism,<sup>7</sup> allowing a kind of progression to be traced. Consequently, Emily presents a highly idealized version of the prototypical romantic hero first projected by Byron, wild, destructive, and untameable. Similarly, Charlotte also offers a romanticised vision of the Byronic hero, but her antihero is more domestic and more easily redeemable. Contrary to her sisters, however, Anne appears to challenge what might be called “typical” Byronism, by portraying her Byronic hero in a realistic light as a disgusting, irresponsible and cruel man (and, uniquely of the three, by contrasting this man with a more acceptable romantic hero in the guise of Gilbert).

This study has also suggested that, for the Brontës (directly for Anne and Charlotte; implicitly for Emily), the Byronic hero is not worthy of idealisation as these antiheroes—when viewed critically—are dangerously abusive and unpredictable. In fact, a stark conclusion based on the Brontë’s view, as seen through this trio of novels, is might be that women who fall into the trap of the Byronic hero will end up dead unless they can somehow escape from such toxic figures. In this respect, the last piece of “advice” that we are given by *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is that no woman can ever change a Byronic hero no matter how *pure* or (in Cathy’s case) even

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<sup>7</sup> For the idea that the Brontë sisters depicted their Byronic heroes as a reflection of Lord Byron, see Bloom (8) and Miller (131).

how Byronic the personality of the heroine may be. If a Byronic hero is redeemable, he will change himself; the most likely outcome, however, is that he probably will not.

## **Further Research**

### **The Absent Mother**

Catherine Earnshaw, Jane Eyre, and Helen Graham do not have mothers (and the Brontës lost their own mother when the girls were very young children). This raises a question that, I think, would be interesting to study further which is absent mothers and the consequences of this absence, and, by implication, the suggestion that motherhood may have a powerful effect on countering male toxicity.

### **Arthur Huntingdon as a Byronic Hero**

Arthur Huntingdon is described as an exceptional Byronic hero in this paper, but he is not widely recognized as a romantic hero in the field of Brontë studies. Because he presents so many Byronic traits, it would be worthwhile to study this figure more fully in order to discuss the question more fully.

### **The Evolution of the Byronic Hero from its Origin to Contemporary Times**

The Byronic hero was a key figure in 19th-century literature. However, the presence of this antihero is also noticed in the 21st century. Curiously, as seen in a recent novel such as *The Love Hypothesis* (Ali Hazelwood: 2021), the contemporary version of the romantic hero changes completely from those portrayed in the 19th century or even a decade ago. It would be interesting to trace the changes that this idealized figure has experienced and to consider what has fostered this change.

### **The Dehumanization of Bertha Mason**

Bertha Mason has been widely recognized as a symbol of the silence that women were forced to endure during the 19th century. Notwithstanding this, researchers often appear to overlook the fact that the woman in the attic was, first and most importantly, a human being. This therefore actually dehumanizes her further and ironically contributes to the mistreatment that Bertha Mason has suffered over time. For this reason, I would suggest that a different approach could be taken when analysing the woman in the attic that focusses first on her (in)human circumstances as the generator of her tragedy, and less on her symbolic significance.

### ***Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as Denouncers of Marital Abuse:**

In the three novels analysed, the three authors denounce the rough realities of marital life by portraying characters such as Helen Graham, Isabella Linton, and Bertha Mason, who are all abused by their husbands and, in effect, by the laws of the time. However, similarly to the case of Bertha Mason, this question, though recognised (particularly in *Tenant*) could be more fully studied across the novels and in light of these three distinct experiences.

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