

The Originality of *Wuthering Heights*

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When Emily Bronte wrote *Wuthering Heights*, she created one of the most memorable novels of the time, as well as one of the most enigmatic and original. Her treatment of many aspects of the book is different and unique when compared to other writers. Instead of using a simple first person or third person narrative, she switches narrators and writes from the point of view of a character only minimally involved in the action. Almost all of her characters are atypical, and the main couple is certainly not what we would picture a hero and a heroine to be like. While she includes themes such as love, violence, and the supernatural, it is not the way we would normally expect a writer to discuss such themes. All these peculiarities put together make *Wuthering Heights* one of the most unusual and original novels of its time, as well as of today.

The story begins from the prospective of Mr. Lockwood, a character who has almost nothing to do with the main characters of the story. He knows nothing previously about these people, and so when he has interactions with them at Wuthering Heights we are at first forced to see his view of things. The critic Nicholas Marsh points out that Lockwood's "language is full of guesswork," and many of his thoughts include phrases such as "perhaps," "I suppose," and "I conjectured."¹ However, it is not from him that we hear the majority of the story, but from Ellen Dean. As W.A. Craik said in *The Bronte Novels*, "On the whole she is the passive observer in whom others confide but whose advice they do not take."² She has been around from the very beginning of the tale, and remarkably has experienced or witnessed almost everything to do with it but is only minimally involved, making her an ideal narrator, though it might at first seem

¹ Marsh 7

² Craik 38

unusual to tell the story from the point of view of such a secondary character. While Ellen tells the main story and it switches occasionally back to Lockwood's perspective, there is another instance when we enter into the viewpoint of a third character. This is during chapter thirteen, when Ellen shares a letter she received from the now-deceased Isabella. This enables us to fill in the blank space about what was going on during that time, and it also gives us another character's point of view.

Since Ellen is telling us the whole story, the entire thing is a flashback. In fact, the main female character and many other important characters are dead when she begins her tale. Craik says that "The story is told in such a way that we either know the result already, or we are prepared to expect a particular outcome."³ We have already found out, from Lockwood, who is still alive, and a hint as to who has married whom. For the most part, Bronte has eliminated the element of suspense – an interesting tactic. Her focus is not on what is going to happen, but mostly on the characters themselves and how they actually act, and the reactions of others. The story encompasses two generations, but the main female character, Catherine, is dead halfway through the novel and it is her daughter that is focused on for the second half. Even though Catherine is deceased early on, it is still Heathcliff's memory of her and love for her that often serves to drive the action forward.

Catherine herself is not a typical heroine. We see her first as a child, and when she is described at the age of twelve, it is said that "she was never so happy as when we were scolding her all at once, and she defying us with her bold, saucy look, and her ready words."⁴ Though this might not be unusual as a child, she is later described at fifteen as being "haughty,

³ Craik 7

⁴ Bronte 29

headstrong” and arrogant.”⁵ She is completely in love with Heathcliff, though the reader may not understand why, but she will not marry him, something to frustrate the reader even more. Craik says that “the reader need not like her any more than Ellen Dean does, and certainly never identifies with her – both remarkable conditions for a heroine.”⁶ It is in fact quite difficult to like her, but Emily Bronte does not think that a necessary condition. Catherine is not dainty and respectable, and she is not even passionate and headstrong in a very positive way. Instead it is in a way that shows her to be arrogant and a bit of a brat when she is younger, throwing temper tantrums, and later she is conflicted and driven by social ambitions, and she is also occasionally cruel. At the end of her life she is driven mad, another atypical situation for a heroine. This is an especially stark contrast to Emily’s sister Charlotte Bronte’s most famous novel, *Jane Eyre*, for in Charlotte’s book the woman that is insane is the demon-woman locked up in the attic, not the heroine of the story. Once Catherine dies her memory lives on through Edgar and Heathcliff’s love, and also through her daughter, Catherine.

Heathcliff is at the center of *Wuthering Heights*, for Ellen’s story begins with his joining the family and ends with his death. Far from being a typical hero, Heathcliff is instead dark, evil, and driven by revenge. He is not reformed in any way throughout the course of the novel, but continues on like this until his dying day, with his only remotely redeeming quality being his devoted love for Catherine. Instead of maturing and improving as he grows older, he instead becomes more brooding and dangerous. In the book *Is Heathcliff a Murderer?*, it is said that “He left an uncouth youth but essentially humane stable-lad. He returns a gentleman psychopath.”⁷ It is important to note that Bronte introduces us to Heathcliff first as a child, when he is loved by his adoptive father and friend Cathy. We also see young Heathcliff being

⁵ Bronte 46

⁶ Craik 15

⁷ Sutherland 53

continually and unfairly picked on by Hindley. Showing Heathcliff in this way creates some sympathy for him, which is difficult to maintain as he later becomes more evil and revengeful.

As an adult, many characters continually question if Heathcliff is completely human. The references to him being the devil or a demon are quite frequent and noticeable, and he has such evil intentions and plots that it is easy to believe he might be. Isabella asks in her letter to Ellen: “Is Mr. Heathcliff a man? If so, is he mad? And if not, is he a devil?”⁸ Ellen herself asserts this imagery multiple times throughout the story, telling Hindley that Heathcliff’s “mouth watered to tear you with his teeth; because he’s only half a man – not so much,”⁹ and describing her thoughts to Mr. Lockwood by saying, “Is he a ghoul, or a vampire? I mused. I had read of such hideous, incarnate demons.”¹⁰ The multitude of these references show that it was quite a deliberate move on Emily Bronte’s part, and it is not just through the dialogue and characters that we get this image. Heathcliff is always described as dark, with black eyes, and he was simply found by Mr. Earnshaw one day and had no home. This lack of origin coupled with the devil references might make the reader wonder if Heathcliff came right out of hell and to Wuthering Heights. Young Catherine, though she compares Heathcliff to the devil, feels that his cruelty comes out of the misery that he has suffered on earth. She shouts at him, “You are miserable, are you not? Lonely, like the devil, and envious like him?”¹¹ Heathcliff himself makes reference to his devilish nature when he says to young Catherine, “You would imagine I was the devil himself, Miss Linton, to excite such horror.”¹² Whether Heathcliff is truly some sort of demon is debatable, but there’s no doubt that Bronte created one of the most unique heroes in literature by making Heathcliff such a cruel, evil, and unforgiving man.

⁸ Bronte 99

⁹ Bronte 131

¹⁰ Bronte 239

¹¹ Bronte 208

¹² Bronte 195

One of the most noticeable things about *Wuthering Heights* is the amount of violence it contains, not just from Heathcliff, but from many of the characters. Heathcliff's violence is the most obvious, when we hear about his doing things such as beating Isabella and throwing a knife to her head, punching young Catherine, and abusing Hindley. He would be quite as violent to his son, Linton, if the boy were not dying and he had reason to keep him alive, but his words and plots are just as violent. Ellen says that she "could not picture a father treating a dying child as tyrannically and wickedly as I afterwards learnt Heathcliff had treated him."¹³ The critic Sutherland goes on to propose that Heathcliff was so violent he may have actually murdered Hindley, though he says that "there are no clear answers to this puzzle."¹⁴ Hindley himself is often violent when he is in his drunken rages, Edgar is forced to defend himself and hits Heathcliff, and even Catherine pinches and slaps Ellen when she does not do what she wants. The amount of violence is surprising in a novel written during this time.

One element that Bronte deals with, that was not particularly uncommon, is the supernatural and ghosts. What makes Bronte's writing about it original is that she never makes it clear whether these ghosts are real or just in the minds of some of the characters. Heathcliff is quite convinced that there are ghosts, saying that "I know that ghosts *have* wandered on earth. Be with me always – take any form – drive me mad!"¹⁵ He wants Catherine's ghost to haunt him so she can be with him all the time, and towards the end he is convinced that she is visiting him and is there in a ghostly form. It does indeed "drive him mad" as he mutters to himself and speaks the name of Catherine, talking to her as if she was actually there. Other characters talk about ghosts as well, with Ellen being a bit superstitious and Mr. Lockwood wondering if *Wuthering Heights* is haunted when he spends the night there. Even the people in town believe

¹³ Bronte 185

¹⁴ Sutherland 57

¹⁵ Bronte 122

in ghosts, and especially the ghosts of Heathcliff and Catherine. Ellen tells us that “the country folks, if you asked them, would swear on their bible that he *walks*.”¹⁶ Though we have these supposed testimonials, it is still unclear whether the ghosts actually exist or if they are just due to overactive imaginations. The idea of ghosts seems like it would be possible in Bronte’s world, and Marsh says that she “shows a supernatural dimension which is an expression of natural laws.”¹⁷ It is possible that these ghosts actually exist, though we are never given any definite proof. The critic Tom Winnifrith says that “the novel ends with us in doubt as to whether the ghosts of Heathcliff and Catherine are still walking over the moor, or whether, as Lockwood piously imagines, all are at rest.”¹⁸ Though Heathcliff and others seem convinced that ghosts exist, it is an ambiguous topic for the reader.

Another theme that it is difficult to determine Bronte’s exact feelings about is her treatment of love. The main plot of the story is about the love between Catherine and Heathcliff, and yet this love is almost frighteningly obsessive and passionate. Heathcliff insists that Edgar “couldn’t love as much in eighty years as I could in a day. And Catherine has a heart as deep as I have: the sea could be as readily contained in that horse-trough, as her whole affection be monopolized by him.”¹⁹ Heathcliff is not exactly the loving type, and yet he clearly loves Catherine. Catherine herself asserts the love between the two, telling Ellen that “I *am* Heathcliff!”²⁰ However, it is difficult to decide if the reader should support this love. While it certainly seems true and passionate, neither of the characters are very likeable and we grow to like Edgar a bit more as the story goes on, supporting his side rather than Heathcliff’s. Also, it is due to Heathcliff’s love that he becomes obsessed with revenge and ruins the lives of so many

¹⁶ Bronte 244

¹⁷ Marsh 212

¹⁸ Winnifrith 47

¹⁹ Bronte 108

²⁰ Bronte 59

people in the story. Another debatable love affair is the one between young Catherine and Linton. They begin to like each other naturally, even though they have only met twice and communicate through overly romanticized love letters. Ellen tries to convince her that this is not real love, saying that “I might just as well talk of loving the miller who comes once a year to buy our corn. Pretty loving, indeed!”²¹ Once the two are almost forced into the arrangement by Heathcliff, Catherine remains dedicated and loyal, despite Linton’s detestable attitude and ways. The reader cannot really approve of the relationship between the two because it is forced upon them and Linton is so unlikeable, but Catherine’s dedication and spirit is extremely admirable. Despite these enigmatic love affairs, the novel does end with a more typical, happy relationship between Catherine and Hareton, after she has helped him to become educated and transform himself.

The themes themselves in *Wuthering Heights* are difficult to identify, with Marsh saying that it is difficult to separate themes in the novel to be able to discuss them, like one could with *Jane Eyre* or a Dickens novel. He says that “*Wuthering Heights* is not like these other texts, however. It is a book which defies the critic’s attempt to take it to pieces.”²² We see hints of some vague themes, like violence and love, but it is difficult to tell if Bronte is making any sort of religious or moral point. Craik says that while reading the novel “conventional religious and moral standards soon come to feel curiously inadequate.”²³ There are references to heaven and hell, but even though a character like Ellen seems to support general religious principles, we are also presented with the extremely pious and religious Joseph, who is made out to be an unkind fool. There is also no antithesis between good and evil in *Wuthering Heights*: “The storm is as

²¹ Bronte 165

²² Marsh 128

²³ Craik 11

much a part of her universe as the calm.”²⁴ The characters cannot be split into “good” or “evil” categories. Each one is indefinable in that way, and while Heathcliff may seem to personify evil, he still has the strangely redeeming quality of his dedicated and true love for Catherine.

Wuthering Heights is an ambiguous novel, with no clear cut way to classify characters or themes. It is original in that it is difficult to be truly understood and dissected. The characters of Heathcliff and Catherine are especially difficult, because the novel focuses on them but we do not see them as a typical romantic couple. Critics have been struggling to understand it ever since it was written, and there are still questions that remain. What Bronte was trying to say by using certain themes and characters may remain a puzzle, but it helps to make *Wuthering Heights* one of the most unique novels in English literature.

²⁴ Marsh 211

Bibliography

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