

Wuthering Heights by Emily Bronte

Author Biography

Emily Bronte was born in Yorkshire in 1818 and died there in 1848. The second of four children (sisters Charlotte and Anne also became authors), Emily Bronte's father was a church rector, and her aunt, who raised her and her siblings after their mother's death, was deeply religious. The Bronte siblings grew up writing stories, poems, and plays to amuse one another, since Yorkshire was sparsely populated and they rarely left home or saw other people. The moors of Yorkshire are the setting of *Wuthering Heights*. Emily Bronte never married and did not write under her own name while she was alive; recognizing that few people took female authors seriously at the time, she published her works under the androgynous pen name "Ellis Bell."

Summary

Mr. Lockwood is renting Thrushcross Grange (a cottage in Yorkshire) from Heathcliff, who is a surly loner type who, at the beginning of the book, is living at Wuthering Heights, four miles from Thrushcross Grange. (Despite their impressive names, both properties are basically cottages.) Also residing at Wuthering Heights are Heathcliff's daughter, Catherine; his son-in-law, Hareton Earnshaw; and two servants, Joseph and Nelly. On his first visit to Wuthering Heights, Lockwood claims to be thrilled with the "desolate" nature of the moor, but soon gets bored, so he asks Nelly to tell him her life story, which she does. Most of the book is narrated as Lockwood's diary-version of Nelly's version of what happened in the past.

As a child, Nelly worked as a servant at Wuthering Heights. The house was then owned by a Mr. Earnshaw, who had two children, a son named Hindley and a daughter named Cathy. One day, Mr. Earnshaw came back from a business trip and brought with him a young boy whom he simply called "Heathcliff." At first, Hindley and Cathy hate Heathcliff, but he and Cathy soon become inseparable, and when Hindley continues to treat Heathcliff badly, Mr. Earnshaw sends Hindley away to school, keeping Heathcliff at home. Mr. Earnshaw dies and Hindley (with his new wife, Frances) inherits Wuthering Heights, where he demotes Heathcliff from adopted son to farmhand. Heathcliff and Cathy stay friends, however.

One day, Heathcliff and Cathy decide to visit their neighbors at Thrushcross Grange, the Lintons. Mr. and Mrs. Linton have two children, Edgar and Isabella. While there, Cathy gets bitten by a dog and has to stay five weeks to recuperate. During that time, Mrs. Linton teaches her some ladylike manners, and Cathy develops a romantic interest in Edgar, which makes her feelings about Heathcliff more complicated. Despite proclaiming herself to be passionately in love with Heathcliff, Cathy agrees to marry Edgar Linton in order to improve her social standing. At Wuthering Heights, Frances gives birth to a boy named Hareton, then dies, leaving Hindley to become a morose alcoholic. Heathcliff leaves.

Three years later, Heathcliff comes back to Wuthering Heights with the goal of getting revenge on everyone whom he feels has wronged him - in other words, everyone. He loans money to the drunken Hindley to increase Hindley's debts, and gets Wuthering Heights as repayment when Hindley dies. Heathcliff also marries Isabella Linton, whom he abuses, and inherits Thrushcross Grange. Cathy gives birth to a daughter named Catherine, then dies, making Heathcliff despondent; Isabella runs away to London and gives birth to a son named Linton.

More years pass. Catherine grows up at Thrushcross Grange, then one day discovers Wuthering Heights, where she meets Hareton and plays with him. Isabella dies and Linton is shipped back to his father, Heathcliff, who abuses him. Catherine meets Linton and the two begin a romance by mail, but Nelly soon discovers that Linton is only pretending to be in love with Catherine because Heathcliff is forcing him to. Linton is in poor health, and Heathcliff realizes that if his son marries Edgar and Cathy's daughter, Heathcliff will inherit Thrushcross Grange after both Linton and Edgar die (since women can't own property at the time). This ends up being exactly what happens. Catherine and Linton marry, Linton dies, Edgar dies, and Heathcliff now owns both Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights. He makes Catherine work as a servant at Wuthering Heights and rents Thrushcross Grange to Lockwood, bringing the story back to the point in time where it starts.

Lockwood, shocked at how everyone he's just met has come to be where they are, leaves Thrushcross Grange and goes back to London. Six months later, however, he goes back to Wuthering Heights, and Nelly tells him what has happened in the meantime: Heathcliff spent more and more time obsessing over Cathy's death, until he was wandering around the moors talking to her ghost, and died out there one day. Catherine and Hareton Earnshaw, meanwhile, fell in love and decided to get married and live more or less happily ever after.

Major Characters

- **Heathcliff:** An orphan who is brought into Wuthering Heights as a child by the house's then-owner, Mr. Earnshaw. He has an unmitigated passion for Cathy, but he's also capable of a great deal of suspicion, jealousy, and malevolence, and he abuses his wife and son without remorse. Most of his life in the book is spent plotting revenge against nearly all the other characters, but his hatred sticks around long after his revenge is complete, and it seems that either his anger or his passionate love for Cathy - or both - are what eventually kill him.
- **Cathy:** The daughter of Mr. Earnshaw, owner of Wuthering Heights, Cathy is a child when she meets Heathcliff, also a child. They are inseparable in childhood and appear to be in love with one another as teenagers, but Cathy marries neighbor boy Edgar Linton instead, infuriating Heathcliff. Cathy gives birth to a daughter, Catherine, and then dies; her ghost reappears in certain places in the story, but it's never clear whether she's "actually" haunting Wuthering Heights or just haunting Heathcliff's tortured mind due to his inability to forget her.
- **Lockwood:** Mr. Lockwood is an outsider to the goings-on at Wuthering Heights. He

rents Thrushcross Grange for a time and befriends the life-long maid, Nelly, recording her stories of the past in his journal. Lockwood seems to be a pretty clueless fellow; for instance, he likes Heathcliff quite a bit even though from the beginning Heathcliff pretty obviously hates everyone and goes so far as to curse at his family and kick his dogs. Lockwood's biases add another level of confusion to the story, since it's not clear whether Heathcliff and Cathy really share some great love story or Lockwood just thinks they did.

- **Nelly:** The maid at Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, who grew up with Cathy. Most of the novel is Lockwood's interpretation of the stories Nelly tells him about Heathcliff, Cathy, the Lintons, and the other characters.

Minor Characters

- **The Lintons:** Edgar and Isabella Linton live at Thrushcross Grange and are children at the same time Cathy and Heathcliff are growing up. They serve as foils for Cathy and Heathcliff, since both are quiet, sensitive, and well-bred but somewhat lifeless, compared to Cathy's and Heathcliff's loudness, violent emotions, and passions.
- **Mr. Earnshaw:** The father of Cathy and Hindley Earnshaw, who brings Heathcliff to Wuthering Heights and favors him over his own son, Hindley. This makes Hindley jealous, and he treats Heathcliff horribly after Mr. Earnshaw dies.
- **Hindley Earnshaw:** Cathy's brother, who inherits Wuthering Heights after their father dies and begins treating Heathcliff horribly. After the death of Hindley's wife, Frances, Hindley becomes an alcoholic and is tricked into falling into debt with Heathcliff, who inherits Wuthering Heights as repayment when Hindley dies.
- **Hareton Earnshaw:** Hindley's son and Cathy's nephew, Hareton stays at Wuthering Heights after his father dies, where Heathcliff treats him like a servant and generally abuses him. He eventually marries Catherine Linton.
- **Linton Heathcliff:** The son of Isabella Linton and Heathcliff, Linton is a sickly boy whom Heathcliff abuses and uses in a scheme to inherit Thrushcross Grange.
- **Catherine Linton:** The daughter of Cathy and Edgar Linton, Catherine marries Heathcliff's son Linton, then is stuck at Wuthering Heights acting as a servant after Linton dies. She eventually marries Hareton Earnshaw.

Important Quotations

“It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now; so he shall never know how I love him; and that, not because he's handsome, Nelly, but because he's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same, and [Edgar's] is as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire. Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff!”

This quotation is part of Cathy's explanation as to why she has chosen to marry Edgar Linton (who has proposed), rather than Heathcliff (who has not proposed, but Heathcliff and Cathy are generally aware of their passions for one another.) Heathcliff overhears Cathy's plan to marry Edgar without her knowledge, and leaves Wuthering Heights for London as a result, returning several years later (as Cathy is on her deathbed) to confront her about it. This statement by Cathy thus sparks a turning point in the plot.

Two elements common to nineteenth-century English novels are at play in this scene. The first is Cathy's decision to marry Edgar Linton, which represents for her a step up the social ladder that will make her one of the finest ladies in the neighborhood. For women, improved social standing was a major consideration in nineteenth-century England; social standing was a concern for men as well, but less so than for women, since men could to an extent improve their social

standing through the work they chose, which was not an option for women at the time. Cathy follows in this tradition by agreeing to “marry up” by choosing Edgar over Heathcliff.

The second element is the tendency in novels from this time period to portray heterosexual relationships as a marriage of opposites that complement one another. In nineteenth-century English literature, “true loves” are generally people who are opposites and who therefore “complete” one another by being together. Cathy alludes to this when she describes herself and Edgar as being as different “as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire.” However, Cathy also turns this convention on its head by describing her relationship with her true love, Heathcliff, not as a marriage of complementary opposites but as two parts of the same soul. Meanwhile, Cathy chooses to marry Edgar, who is her opposite, but who is not her “true love.”

“I got the sexton, who was digging Linton’s grave, to remove the earth off her coffin lid, and I opened it. I thought, once, I would have stayed there, when I saw her face again—it is hers yet—he had hard work to stir me; but he said it would change, if the air blew on it, and so I struck one side of the coffin loose, and covered it up—not Linton’s side, damn him! I wish he’d been soldered in lead—and I bribed the sexton to pull it away, when I’m laid there, and slide mine out too. I’ll have it made so, and then, by the time Linton gets to us, he’ll not know which is which!”

“That, however, which you may suppose the most potent to arrest my imagination, is actually the least, for what is not connected with her to me? and what does not recall her? I cannot look down to this floor, but her features are shaped on the flags! In every cloud, in every tree—filling the air at night, and caught by glimpses in every object by day, I am surrounded with her image! The most ordinary faces of men and women—my own features—mock me with a resemblance. The entire world is a dreadful collection of memoranda that she did exist, and that I have lost her!”

Wuthering Heights is often said to be an example of the English “Gothic novel” or “Gothic romance.” Books in this tradition are typically dark in tone and deal with the relationship between “eros et thanatos,” or “love and death.” This quotation, spoken by Heathcliff, is one of the most Gothic-romance-type scenes in the novel.

By this point, Edgar Linton has died and Cathy has been dead for some time. Meanwhile, Heathcliff’s obsession with Cathy has deepened over the years, and now that he has completed his revenge by claiming both Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, his focus has turned to his rage and grief over Cathy’s loss. He sees her everywhere, but rather than calming him, this makes him only more determined to reclaim her (although she has been dead for many years). This is why Heathcliff says that he “saw her face,” not that he saw *her*; like the houses

she lived in and items she owned, Cathy's body is merely an object Cathy possessed, not Cathy herself. He has the side of her coffin removed and plans to be buried beside Cathy with the corresponding side of his own coffin removed, so that their remains can intermix. At this point, Heathcliff seems to realize that he cannot possess Cathy by possessing the objects associated with her, and his passionate intent to destroy people and get revenge starts to fade away.

Criticism

Socio-economic and Class Structures

Wuthering Heights is a study of nineteenth-century English class structures and socioeconomic status. At the time, one's social class depended not only on the amount of money one had, but also where that money came from (was it earned by working or inherited?) and one's relationships to other people. Men were generally able to move up or down the social ladder by networking, choosing prestigious professions, or by being given a noble title by whomever was on the throne at the time. Women generally moved up or down the class ladder based on who they married; marrying "up" was, for women, a major concern.

In *Wuthering Heights*, the Lintons who live at Thrushcross Grange represent the highest social standing in the local community, but even they are only middle-class in the context of their times. The Earnshaws, at Wuthering Heights, are slightly below the Lintons class-wise, since Wuthering Heights is a farm, but they are still staunchly middle-class because they have servants. The servants, Joseph, Nelly, and Zillah, are among the lower-middle class, which consisted mostly of people who worked as maids, butlers, or housekeepers in other people's houses. Below the lower-middle class of servants were farmhands; therefore, when Hindley forces Heathcliff to work as a farmhand, and when Heathcliff forces Hareton Earnshaw to work as a farmhand later in the novel, both events are intended to degrade the person required to work as a farmhand.

The introduction of Heathcliff into the world of *Wuthering Heights* creates a great deal of class tension, shining a light on the class structure of the world in which the book is set. Heathcliff is an impoverished orphan (a class even lower than farmhand) wandering the streets of Liverpool when he is picked up by Mr. Earnshaw and brought to Wuthering Heights. At the time, raising someone from the bottom of the social classes to the middle- or upper-middle class was simply unheard of, and the novel gets some of its power from the fact that Mr. Earnshaw does the unheard-of by favoring Heathcliff as much as his own children. This is what encourages Hindley to demote Heathcliff to farm labor after Mr. Earnshaw dies, and this demotion is the reason Heathcliff uses his own power later to demote Hindley's son Hareton to a farm laborer.

Feminist Criticism

In nineteenth-century England, women were assumed to be unable to write great literature, primarily because they were believed to be unable to think great thoughts and a woman's social world was considered uninteresting. Women in general were expected to be meek, gentle, and submissive; author Coventry Patmore would later sum up this stereotype by calling it "the angel in the house." In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë turns the "angel in the house" image on its

head, not only by writing the book but by including female characters who are far more complex than the one-dimensional stereotype. Of these, Cathy is the prime example. Isabella Linton starts out as an “angel in the house” type, but then demonstrates a level of assertiveness that was frowned upon in women at the time, when she runs away from Heathcliff and takes their son, Linton, with her.

Symbolism

Wuthering Heights uses two major symbols throughout the book: ghosts and the Yorkshire moors. Ghosts are a common theme in Gothic novels, but in *Wuthering Heights*, the text never reveals whether any of the ghosts actually exist or are just appearing in characters’ imaginations or dreams. Near the beginning of the story, Lockwood encounters the ghost of Cathy, who claims she has been wandering the moor for twenty years, but he may be dreaming. Heathcliff also finds himself haunted by Cathy’s ghost, but it is never clear whether her ghost is really hanging around Wuthering Heights or if her image is just a product of Heathcliff’s grief-addled imagination.

The moors are also a major theme in the book. *Wuthering Heights* is built on the moor, an expanse in northern England that consists mostly of infertile land. Very little grows or can be grown on the moors, which are generally uniform and desolate. However, moorland can be waterlogged and often contains areas of boggy or marshy land, some of which are deep enough to drown in. In their childhoods, Cathy and Heathcliff play together on the moors, symbolizing their inner “wildness” or untamed natures. As the book progresses, their relationship is often symbolized by the moors, but the image changes to show how destructive Cathy and Heathcliff’s love is when it obsesses without changing.

Themes

The major theme of *Wuthering Heights* is the destructiveness of obsessive love. Cathy and Heathcliff’s love for one another endures throughout all the years the book covers, but it also triggers most of the major conflicts in the novel. For instance, Cathy cites her love for Heathcliff as the reason she has to reject him in favor of Edgar Linton, and it is also the reason Heathcliff leaves Wuthering Heights, only to return years later to a passionate confrontation of Cathy while she is dying. Heathcliff’s love quickly turns to obsession, pushing him to scheme ways to keep control of Wuthering Heights, Thrushcross Grange, and everyone involved with them as a way for him to hold onto the few remnants of Cathy that remain in the world. In contrast, Catherine and Hareton Earnshaw appear to be in love at the end of the book, but it is a love that changes over time, not one that fixates obsessively. As a result, Catherine and Hareton live happily ever after, while both Cathy and Heathcliff are destroyed.

Historical Events

Nineteenth-century England was changing rapidly and in a number of ways. Social class still mattered a great deal, affecting where and how people lived, what they ate, what they wore, how they spoke, and the work they did, but more widespread educational opportunities were making it easier for men to move out of the social rank in which they were born. Meanwhile, changes in

farming had shaken up the English countryside, leaving many people without work and thus no choice but to move to the rapidly growing cities, where masses of people were needed to operate the booming manufacturing sector. These changes represented shake-ups of systems that had been in place for hundreds of years, which caused some anxiety. As farming and manufacturing became more efficient, a “leisure class” was created, which - especially for women - left many people without anything to do other than be decorative. The Gothic romance, represented by books like *Wuthering Heights*, flourished in this period in part because it spoke to the emotions, rather than the intellect. Therefore, readers with little education, such as women who were deliberately prevented from advanced studies in most cases, could still read, understand, and enjoy Gothic romance novels.

Further Reading

Emily Bronte wrote no other books. Her sister Charlotte, however, produced both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, which are similar to Emily’s work in several ways.

Secondary Sources:

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