

WUTHERING HEIGHTS

by Emily Bronte



THE AUTHOR

Emily Brontë (1818-1848) was born in Yorkshire, England (where *Wuthering Heights* is set), the fifth of six children of Patrick and Maria Brontë. Her father was appointed Anglican curate in the isolated hilltop village of Haworth two years later. When Emily was three, her mother died, and she and her siblings were commended to the care of her aunt, Elizabeth Branwell. With only a few brief exceptions, including a year spent in a boarding school in Brussels, she spent the remainder of her life in Haworth.

The isolation of the Brontë children seems to have generated a rich life of the imagination. She and her sisters Anne and Charlotte began writing poetry at an early age, and actually published a book of poems under male pseudonyms in 1846. Before the publication of their book of poetry, while they were still in their teens, the girls spent years writing their own fictional narratives about two imaginary islands in the Pacific, Gondal and Gaaldine.

Ultimately, the three Brontë sisters all had novels published. Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* was an immediate best-seller, but Emily's only novel, *Wuthering Heights*, gained far less public acceptance, being generally viewed as a dark and depressing work, described by one critic as "odiously and abominably pagan." Only after her death, which occurred just one year after *Wuthering Heights* was published (she became ill after attending her brother Branwell's funeral, and died of tuberculosis three months later), was the work able to take its place among the greatest English novels of the nineteenth century.

PLOT SUMMARY

Wuthering Heights is narrated by Mr. Lockwood, who takes up residence at Thrushcross Grange in 1801, and encounters the denizens of Wuthering Heights on a visit to that dark residence. He subsequently asks his housekeeper, Ellen (Nelly) Dean, about his neighbors, and her narrative constitutes the bulk of the book.

The story, which begins in the year 1771, concerns two families, the Earnshaws, who live at Wuthering Heights, and the Lintons, who live at nearby Thrushcross Grange. Each family has two children - Hindley Earnshaw and his much younger sister Catherine, and Edgar and Isabella Linton. Early in the story, Mr. Earnshaw brings a young orphan named Heathcliff home from Liverpool and announces that he intends to raise him as his own son. In fact, he favors Heathcliff over his own children, generating lifelong animosity between Heathcliff and Hindley. Mrs. Earnshaw soon dies, and is followed quickly by her husband, leaving Hindley master of the house and guardian of the younger children. He quickly takes the opportunity to gain his revenge against Heathcliff, who is treated as an outcast and servant, and kept from contact with Catherine, despite the attachment that has developed between the two of them.

Hindley marries Frances, a woman from outside the neighborhood, and they have a child, Hareton; Frances dies shortly thereafter. Meanwhile, Catherine and Heathcliff have been spending time together in secret, and one night they sneak out across the moor to Thrushcross Grange. While peeking in the window, Catherine is attacked by a dog and badly bitten. The Lintons invite her inside, but refuse to admit Heathcliff. Catherine spends the next five months with the Lintons, and learns from their society, while at the same time becoming good friends with Edgar, who is in turn smitten with the young beauty. Catherine now views Heathcliff as ignorant and degraded, and decides to marry Edgar, despite the fact that she doesn't love him.

Heathcliff storms away in a fit of anger and jealousy, and is not heard from for the next three years. During his years away from the moors, Heathcliff makes a fortune, and returns to exact his revenge on the Earnshaws and the Lintons. He takes up residence at Wuthering Heights, and soon takes advantage of Hindley, who, in his grief over the death of his wife, has turned to idleness, drinking, and gambling. Before long, Heathcliff controls the estate, having won it in a card game, and abuses Hindley and treats Hareton like a servant, depriving him of all education and social graces (much as Hindley had earlier treated Heathcliff himself). Heathcliff, meanwhile, begins to visit Catherine at Thrushcross Grange, and in the process attracts the attention of Edgar's sister Isabella. Despite the fact that Heathcliff openly professes his love for Catherine and denies any affection for Isabella, the latter elopes with Heathcliff, against the advice of everyone in the household. This leads to a major falling-out between Heathcliff and Edgar, after which Catherine becomes ill, and dies while delivering her first child, a girl also named Catherine. Meanwhile, Heathcliff openly abuses his wife Isabella, and she finally flees the house while carrying their child, a weak and sickly boy named Linton Heathcliff.

Isabella becomes ill and dies, first entrusting her son to Edgar, but Heathcliff soon demands the return of his son to Wuthering Heights, where he indulges his every whim while secretly despising his weakness. Having already gained control of Wuthering Heights, he schemes to possess Thrushcross Grange as well by marrying young Linton to Cathy, the daughter of Edgar and Catherine. Edgar becomes increasingly sickly, so Heathcliff accelerates his plot by tricking Cathy into coming to Wuthering Heights to visit Linton, then keeping her a prisoner and threatening to keep her there until after her father is dead unless she agrees to marry Linton. She goes through with the marriage, and her father dies shortly thereafter. Linton, having served his purpose, is then neglected by Heathcliff, and he, too, soon dies, leaving Heathcliff the owner of both houses. He continues to exact his revenge by treating the surviving offspring of his enemies, Hareton and Cathy, as servants. This is the situation that Lockwood observes when he first arrives at Wuthering Heights in 1801.

We then discover that the ghost of Catherine has been haunting Heathcliff for the last eighteen years, driving him increasingly out of his mind. Meanwhile, Cathy and Hareton are growing fond of one another, and are actually finding a modicum of happiness in the miserable environment created by the vengeful Heathcliff. When he realizes that his plan for vengeance has failed, he gives up on life, and seeks only to be reunited with his beloved Catherine. He soon stops eating and dies, being laid to rest by her side, his dust mingling with hers in the grave. The story ends with the announcement of the engagement of Hareton and Cathy, who plan to leave Wuthering Heights and take up residence at Thrushcross Grange.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Lockwood - The narrator of the frame in which the story takes place, he is a minor character who has limited contact with characters in the story during the last year of the narrative. He thinks of himself as a social outcast, but soon learns he is not in the same league as Heathcliff and the other denizens of Wuthering Heights.
- Ellen (Nelly) Dean - Housekeeper for the Earnshaws, she narrates most of the story under the guise of relating it to Lockwood. She grew up with Hindley and Catherine, and at various times was caretaker for Hareton and Cathy.
- Hindley Earnshaw - The elder of the two Earnshaw children, he rules the household after his father's death, marries Frances, and becomes the father of Hareton. After his wife's death, he becomes increasingly disconsolate, and ultimately loses Wuthering Heights to Heathcliff.
- Catherine Earnshaw (later Linton) - Hindley's younger sister, she is wild and free-spirited, but is somewhat tamed by her association with Edgar and Isabella Linton. She loves Heathcliff as her own self, but refuses to marry him because of his lack of education and breeding. Instead, she marries Edgar Linton, and dies giving birth to young Cathy. Her ghost appears several times in the story.
- Heathcliff - Found by Mr. Earnshaw on a trip to Liverpool, he is raised as a member of the family, but the favoritism shown him by his guardian alienates him from Hindley, who becomes his sworn enemy. He is neglected and reduced to servant status by Hindley after Mr. Earnshaw's death, but becomes Catherine's soul-mate. After Catherine's marriage to Edgar, he leaves for three years, makes a fortune, and returns to exact revenge on both Earnshaw and Linton families. He marries Isabella, and in turn abuses Hindley, Hareton, Isabella, Linton, and Cathy. Meanwhile, he is haunted by the ghost of Catherine. When he realizes that his plan for revenge is doomed to failure, he gives up on life, having nothing more to live for, stops eating, and soon dies going to join his beloved Catherine.
- Edgar Linton - Kind and gentle soul who wins the hand of Catherine, if not her heart, though he loves her too madly to recognize their essential incompatibility. He raises young Cathy until his own death.

- Isabella Linton - Edgar's brother, who as a somewhat rebellious young girl falls for Heathcliff against the advice of Edgar, Catherine, and Nelly. She is abused by Heathcliff and soon leaves him, giving birth to Linton and dying a few years later.
- Hareton Earnshaw - Son of Hindley and Frances, he spends most of his early years under the harsh tutelage of Heathcliff, who despises him and wants him to grow up in ignorance and misery. Despite this treatment, he is a young man of good character, who falls in love with Cathy as soon as he meets her, but is repeatedly rebuffed, though finally she grows to love him. At the end of the story they are engaged to be married.
- Cathy Linton (later Heathcliff, later Earnshaw) - Daughter of Edgar and Catherine, she is raised by her father after her mother dies in childbirth. She has her father's looks and her mother's independence of spirit. Shortly before her father's death, she is forced by Heathcliff to marry his son Linton, who dies shortly thereafter. For the next few years, she is treated as a servant by Heathcliff. She gradually falls in love with Hareton, and marries him after Heathcliff's death.
- Joseph - A servant at Wuthering Heights, Joseph is a grumbling, hypocritical religious fanatic who, as the only religious character in the story, underscores its underlying paganism.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“I perceive that people in these regions acquire over people in towns the value that a spider in a dungeon does over a spider in a cottage, to their various occupants; and yet the deepened attraction is not entirely owing to the situation of the looker-on. They do live more in earnest, more in themselves, and less in surface change, and frivolous external things. I could fancy a love for life here almost possible; and I was a fixed unbeliever in any love of a year's standing. On estate resembles setting a hungry man down to a single dish, on which he may concentrate his entire appetite and do it justice; the other, introducing him to a table laid out by French cooks: he can perhaps extract as much enjoyment from the whole; but each part is a mere atom in his regard and remembrance.” (Lockwood, p.55-56)

“‘It is not,’ retorted she; ‘it is the best! The others were the satisfaction of my whims: and for Edgar's sake, too, to satisfy him. This is for the sake of one who comprehends in his person my feelings to Edgar and myself. I cannot express it; but surely you and everybody have a notion that there is, or should be, an existence of yours beyond you. What were the use of my creation, if I were entirely contained here? My great miseries in this world have been Heathcliff's miseries, and I watched and felt each from the beginning: my great thought in living is himself. If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger: I should not seem a part of it. My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods: time will change it, I'm well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath: a source of little visible delight, but necessary. Nelly, I am Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being. So don't talk of our separation again: it is impracticable.’” (Catherine, p.74-75)

“‘Afraid? No!’ he replied. ‘I have neither a fear, nor a presentiment, nor a hope of death. Why should I? With my hard constitution and temperate mode of living, and unperilous occupations, I ought to ,and probably shall remain above ground, till there is scarcely a black hair on my head - And yet I cannot continue in this condition! I have to remind myself to breathe - almost to remind my heart to beat! And it is like bending back a stiff spring: it is by compulsion that I do the slightest act not prompted by one thought, and by compulsion, that I notice anything alive or dead, which is not associated with one universal idea. I have a single wish, and my whole being and faculties are yearning to attain it. They have yearned towards it so long, and so unwaveringly, that I’m convinced it will be reached - and soon - because it has devoured my existence: I am swallowed in the anticipation of its fulfillment.’” (Heathcliff, p.296-297)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Discuss the validity of the following statement: Though it was written during the Victorian Era, and though the events narrated in the novel take place during the Age of Reason, *Wuthering Heights* is a Romantic novel, not in the sense of being a love story, but in the sense of seeking to demonstrate the power of emotion over that of reason.
2. “I ... wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth.” Passion leads only to death, and Hareton and Cathy choose to leave the wild atmosphere of *Wuthering Heights* for the more cultured environs of Thrushcross Grange. Only those untouched by society, the ignorant inhabitants of the moors, could possibly believe that the ghosts of Catherine and Heathcliff still wander abroad. Is *Wuthering Heights* essentially a novel of the early Victorian era, demonstrating the ultimate triumph of society over nature? Is Emily Brontë’s great novel a sterling example of Romanticism or a critique of it?
3. Discuss the view of childhood found in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*. Contrary to the glorification of childhood as an age of innocence by most of the thinkers of the Romantic Era, Emily Brontë portrays childhood as a time of violent, uncontrolled, unrealistic passion, which must ultimately be succeeded by the balanced maturity of adulthood. Thus the only happy characters in *Wuthering Heights* are those who are able to move beyond the passions of childhood, while those who fail to do so destroy not only themselves, but also those around them. Do you agree with this assessment? Why or why not?
4. The central characters in *Wuthering Heights* are strange and wild, and thus alien to the typical reading audience, but Emily Brontë uses the character of the narrator, Lockwood, to bridge the gap between her characters and her readers.

5. Is the ghost of Catherine, which appears to Lockwood near the beginning of the novel and later in various circumstances to Heathcliff, intended by the author to be understood by the readers as a real ghost, or simply as an indicator of the psychological conditions of the characters to whom it appears?
6. The world of *Wuthering Heights* is a patriarchal one - all the power and legal advantages are vested in the male characters, leaving the women little more than pawns in their hands. In what ways is the existence of a patriarchal society central to the plot developments of *Wuthering Heights*?
7. The setting of *Wuthering Heights* is central to the story. Such a tale of unbridled passion is at home in the wild moorlands of northern England, but would never have been credible had it been set in the streets and houses of London.
8. Cathy and Hareton are naturally drawn to each other because Cathy is much like her mother and Hareton has come to resemble his guardian, but their love is more stable because they lack the extreme character traits of the older generation.
9. Discuss the following: "The world of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* is a moral world where sin is ultimately punished and good is ultimately rewarded, but it is a pagan world because reward and retribution occur only in the context of this earthly life." Do you agree or disagree? Support your answer with specifics from the novel.
10. "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:19, NIV). How does Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* demonstrate the truth of this biblical teaching?
11. Emily Bronte was the daughter of an Anglican clergyman, but after the death of her mother when Emily was only three years old, she was reared by her aunt, and appears to have had no more than a distant relationship with her father. In what ways does the old servant Joseph, the only remotely Christian character in *Wuthering Heights*, reveal the author's attitude toward the religion of her father?
12. Compare and contrast the actions and motivations of Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* and Iago in *Othello* in their monomaniacal obsessions with exacting revenge upon their perceived enemies.
13. One of the characteristics of the Gothic novel is the menacing nature of the setting, which serves to create in the reader a sense of doom and foreboding, and in some cases, terror. Though the settings of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* are very different, both share this characteristic. In what ways are the descriptive techniques used by the two authors similar in making the respective settings of the two novels function almost as characters in the stories?

14. Emily Bronte's sister Charlotte, the author of *Jane Eyre*, did not like Jane Austen's work because she thought Austen failed to write about her characters' hearts. Do you think this criticism is accurate? Compare Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* to *Pride and Prejudice* in terms of the depth or superficiality of the emotional lives the characters. Use specific examples.
15. A comparison of the works of Jane Austen and Emily Bronte illustrates clearly the changes introduced into literature by the Romantic movement. Choose one specific scene or character from *Wuthering Heights* and *Pride and Prejudice* and use it to discuss the difference between Romanticism and the style of literature that preceded it.
16. Compare and contrast the views of love presented in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. How do the two authors understand love differently? Is one more biblical than the other? How do the two understand the relationship between love and marriage?