

Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

NCLC

165

Volume 165

Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

*Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Philosophers, and Other
Creative Writers Who Died between 1800
and 1899, from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations*



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Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism, Vol. 165

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 84-643008

ISBN 0-7876-8649-2
ISSN 0732-1864

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Preface

Since its inception in 1981, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC) has been a valuable resource for students and librarians seeking critical commentary on writers of this transitional period in world history. Designated an “Outstanding Reference Source” by the American Library Association with the publication of its first volume, NCLC has since been purchased by over 6,000 school, public, and university libraries. The series has covered more than 450 authors representing 33 nationalities and over 17,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical reaction to nineteenth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as NCLC.

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NCLC continues the survey of criticism of world literature begun by Thomson Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC) and *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC).

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the list will focus primarily on twentieth-century translations, selecting

those works most commonly considered the best by critics. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication. Lists of **Representative Works** by different authors appear with topic entries.

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xiii

| | |
|---|-----|
| Emily Brontë 1818-1848 | 1 |
| <i>English novelist and poet</i> | |
| <i>Entry devoted to the novel Wuthering Heights (1847)</i> | |
| George Washington Harris 1814-1869 | 160 |
| <i>American sketch writer</i> | |
| Multatuli 1820-1887 | 301 |
| <i>Dutch novelist, essayist, poet, playwright, and short story writer</i> | |

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 377

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 483

NCLC Cumulative Nationality Index 495

NCLC-165 Title Index 499

Wuthering Heights

Emily Brontë

(Also wrote under the pseudonym Ellis Bell) English novelist and poet.

The following entry presents criticism of Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847). For information on Brontë's complete career, see *NCLC*, Volume 16. For further information on *Wuthering Heights*, see *NCLC*, Volume 35.

INTRODUCTION

First published under the pseudonym Ellis Bell, Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* remains one of the most popular and widely discussed novels of nineteenth-century literature. Over the years the work has invited a range of interpretations by prominent scholars, who have generally regarded it as an eloquent and haunting representation of the human condition. In certain respects *Wuthering Heights* is a quintessential Gothic novel: it incorporates many of the traditional devices and motifs of the genre, including the doomed love affair, the gloomy, foreboding setting, and the recurrent suggestions of supernatural phenomena. At the same time, however, the novel's weighty philosophical themes, combined with its poetic prose style and inventive narrative structure, lend it a distinctly modern sensibility, and the work ultimately transcends the limitations of any particular category. Its protagonist, the enigmatic and destructive Heathcliff, has secured a permanent position as one of the most original and complex characters in literature. A larger-than-life figure—the embodiment of pure human emotion—Heathcliff has posed a unique challenge to generations of scholars, consistently defying straightforward critical analysis. Indeed, Heathcliff's ambiguity and intensity, coupled with Brontë's broader examination of humanity's struggle to survive in an insensate and irrational universe, lie at the heart of the novel's profound psychological power.

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

Set in the inhospitable landscape of the Yorkshire moors, *Wuthering Heights* tells the story of the powerful, and ultimately fatal, emotional bond that develops

between Catherine Earnshaw and her adopted brother, Heathcliff. Although the work is characterized by a convoluted chronology and an unorthodox structure, it is also meticulously logical and adheres to an ingenious symmetry. The novel opens with the figure of Lockwood, a stranger traveling through the moors, as he seeks accommodations in the region. In the course of his search he meets Heathcliff, who is the landlord of two estates—Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights—and the central figure of the novel. Despite Heathcliff's somber, gruff manner, Lockwood initially perceives him as a sympathetic and good-hearted man and decides to rent Thrushcross Grange from him. During the course of two visits to Wuthering Heights, however, Lockwood begins to recognize Heathcliff's sinister nature, particularly in his spiteful attitude toward his daughter-in-law, Catherine, and in his generally inhospitable conduct. When a snowstorm forces a reluctant Lockwood to spend the night at Wuthering Heights, he finds his sleep disturbed by a harrowing dream of a young girl who shatters the window of his room and begins scraping her wrists along the jagged glass. When Lockwood recounts the dream, Heathcliff descends into a state of rage and despair, and as Lockwood leaves the room he overhears his host imploring the girl, whose name is also Catherine, to open the window. Upon returning to Thrushcross Grange, Lockwood asks the servant, Nelly Dean, the reason behind his host's peculiar outburst. Here the narrative shifts to the perspective of Nelly, who has been on intimate terms with Heathcliff and the other main characters of the novel for most of her life, and the novel's central plot begins to emerge.

Nelly recounts the complex story of two households, beginning with the day when the original owner of Wuthering Heights, a prosperous merchant named Earnshaw, returns from a trip to Liverpool with an orphan boy, whom he names Heathcliff. An exotic, dark-skinned figure, Heathcliff develops an immediate emotional affinity with Earnshaw's daughter, Catherine, and the two quickly become close, acting as brother and sister. Nelly describes the history of this intimate companionship, while also relating the bitter rivalry that emerges between Heathcliff and Earnshaw's elder son, Hindley, who resents the foundling's presence. For most of his childhood, Heathcliff is treated by Earnshaw as a son, and he devotes his youth to exploring the rugged beauty of the surrounding landscape and inventing

elaborate games with Catherine. After Earnshaw's death, however, Heathcliff's fortunes change radically. Hindley assumes control over the management of the household, and he abruptly revokes Heathcliff's status as a member of the family, forcing him to become the house servant. At once distressed and confused by Heathcliff's degraded status, the now adolescent Catherine persists with her normal attitude toward her adopted brother, although Heathcliff's shame and indignation place a strain on their relationship. One evening while Catherine and Heathcliff are roaming the moors, they come upon Thrushcross Grange, home of the Lintons. As Catherine peers through a window into the Lintons' living room, she beholds a picture of sophistication and elegance, and she imagines for the first time a very different life than the one she knows at Wuthering Heights. Shortly after this experience, Heathcliff decides that life under Hindley's control is unbearable, and he runs away. During his absence, Catherine becomes engaged to Edgar Linton, the heir to Thrushcross Grange. As she explains her feelings to Nelly, Catherine describes the torment she feels over her decision, particularly because it undermines her closeness to Heathcliff. When she utters her famous declaration, "I am Heathcliff," she suggests not only the overpowering empathy she feels for her adopted brother, but also the impossibility of loving him as a person separate from herself. In the end she perseveres in her plan and marries Linton.

A few years later, Heathcliff, now a wealthy and urbane young man, returns to Wuthering Heights. He recounts little about his travels or his elevation in fortune, seeking only to resume his intimacy with Catherine. His attention to his adopted sister stirs jealousy in Linton, however, provoking a violent confrontation between the two men. As Heathcliff recognizes that his former relationship with Catherine is now impossible, he becomes resentful and withdrawn. At this point in the novel, Heathcliff's elaborate plot to revenge himself begins to unfold. He conspires to marry Linton's sister, Isabella, although he despises her, while simultaneously bullying Hindley into a state of alcoholism and incapacitation. When Catherine dies suddenly during the birth of her daughter, Catherine, Heathcliff sinks into a state of despair, and any remaining shred of compassion dies inside of him. Upon Hindley's death Heathcliff assumes control over Wuthering Heights, forcing Hindley's son, Hareton, to become a household servant, while denying him even a rudimentary education; and Heathcliff manages to marry his feeble and sickly son, Linton, to young Catherine, in the process gaining ownership of Thrushcross Grange. As Nelly relates the final details of this sordid chain of events, which includes the death of Linton, the narrative returns to the present and to Lockwood's point of view. Lockwood is present to witness Heathcliff's final unraveling: still inconsolable over the death of Catherine, he withdraws even further, declining any kind of social interaction and eventually refus-

ing food. Meanwhile, Lockwood observes a growing intimacy between Hareton and young Catherine, who teaches the abused young man to read. Heathcliff dies a short time later and is buried in a grave next to Catherine's; meanwhile, Hareton and young Catherine marry and take over the management of the two estates.

MAJOR THEMES

Wuthering Heights examines the struggles between morality, intellect, and passion that rage inside the human psyche. Throughout the novel, Brontë opposes images of refinement and security with visions of brute, violent force, creating a vigorous tension that underlies the relationships between the novel's central characters and lends the work its unique power. Indeed, each character seems caught in a state of perpetual conflict, driven by both external and internal impulses. When Catherine decides to marry Linton, she falls sway not only to society's notion of a sensible union between a man and a woman, but also to her own belief that happiness, to some extent, arises from a state of security and harmony. At the same time, however, her inexplicably powerful feelings toward Heathcliff, which she experiences as an essential aspect of her personality, make such rational notions of happiness seem hollow and unattainable. Even Heathcliff, who in many respects is the embodiment of irrationality and cruelty, elicits some sympathy from the reader, particularly in his abiding loyalty to the memory of Catherine, as well as in his ability to rise above his degraded condition to become an educated, prosperous, and attractive man. Although Heathcliff's rage is so extreme at times that he repels everyone around him—including most readers—in the end his anguish resonates with anyone who has ever suffered loss, lending him his unique humanity. Dualities, then—between civilization and nature, security and danger, affection and brutality, kindness and malice—dominate the novel.

Brontë's use of symbolism also plays a crucial role in *Wuthering Heights*. The novel abounds with vivid images of landscape, weather, home, and animals, all charged with profound meaning. Several scholars, notably Thomas Moser and Carol Jacobs, have focused on Brontë's use of windows and doorways as central images in the work, describing them both as openings into different realms of feeling and experience and at the same time as barriers that imprison the individual characters. Dogs play a key part in amplifying the novel's potent sense of foreboding. In some of the novel's most unforgettable scenes, dogs are victims of blind cruelty, as when Heathcliff hangs Isabella's dog and when Hareton tortures and kills a litter of puppies. In other instances, the presence of dogs contributes to an air of menace, or dogs become agents of savage and impla-

cable violence, as when Lockwood finds himself attacked by the dogs at Thrushcross Grange. Through these powerful images, Brontë's readers become aware, on a visceral level, of the forces of irrationality and ambiguity that pervade the novel.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Wuthering Heights met with general perplexity upon its original publication. Although some critics admired the work's powers of expressiveness and emotion, they also voiced disappointment in the rawness of the novel's prose style, as well as in its seemingly disjointed structure. Some critics, upon discovering that the author was a woman, even described their uneasiness about the work's subject matter, declaring that the novel's unremitting sadism constituted inappropriate material for a female author. By the turn of the century, however, most scholars of Victorian literature acknowledged the work's singular genius and hailed Brontë as one of the most important woman novelists of the nineteenth century. Most later-twentieth-century criticism has focused on the psychological aspects of the novel, particularly as they relate to the character of Heathcliff. Both Dorothy van Ghent and Harold Bloom have paid particular attention to the demonic qualities in Heathcliff, regarding him as an allegorical representation not only of human existence, but of the creative act itself. Recent critics have begun to explore more elaborate frameworks for interpreting the novel. Among these scholars are Terry Eagleton, who has examined the work's self-mythologizing qualities within a Marxist context, and Barbara Munson Goff, who has pointed out parallels between Brontë's explorations of human character and the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell [as Ellis Bell; with Charlotte and Anne Brontë] (poetry) 1846

**Wuthering Heights* [as Ellis Bell] (novel) 1847

Life and Works of the Sisters Brontë. 7 vols. [with Charlotte and Anne Brontë] (novels and poetry) 1899-1903

The Shakespeare Head Brontë. 19 vols. [with Charlotte and Anne Brontë] (novels, poetry, and letters) 1931-38

Gondal Poems (poetry) 1938

The Complete Poems of Emily Jane Brontë (poetry) 1941

*This edition of *Wuthering Heights* was published with Ann Brontë's *Agnes Grey*.

CRITICISM

G. W. Peck (review date June 1848)

SOURCE: Peck, G. W. "Wuthering Heights." *American Review*, n.s., 1, no. 6 (June 1848): 572-85.

[In the following excerpt, Peck finds that the "coarse" style and vulgar subject matter of *Wuthering Heights* might exert a negative influence on female readers, but concedes that the novel is a work of great intelligence and imaginative power.]

Respecting a book so original as [*Wuthering Heights*],¹ and written with so much power of imagination, it is natural that there should be many opinions. Indeed, its power is so predominant that it is not easy after a hasty reading to analyze one's impressions so as to speak of its merits and demerits with confidence. We have been taken and carried through a new region, a melancholy waste, with here and there patches of beauty; have been brought in contact with fierce passions, with extremes of love and hate, and with sorrow that none but those who have suffered can understand. This has not been accomplished with ease, but with an ill-mannered contempt for the decencies of language, and in a style which might resemble that of a Yorkshire farmer who should have endeavored to eradicate his provincialism by taking lessons of a London footman. We have had many sad bruises and tumbles in our journey, yet it was interesting, and at length we are safely arrived at a happy conclusion.

The first feeling with which we turn back to recall the incidents passed through, is one of uneasiness and gloom; even the air of summer, so reviving to city dwellers, does not dispel it. To write or think about the tale, without being conscious of a phase of sadness, is impossible; which mood of the mind, if it appear to the reader, let him not attribute to an over susceptibility, unless he has read the book with no such impression himself.

We shall take for granted that a novel which has excited so unusual an attention, has been or will soon be in the hands of most of our readers of light literature, and shall therefore write rather *from* than *upon* it. We will not attempt an outline of the story; it is so void of events that an outline would be of small assistance to any who have not read it, and would only be tedious to those who have. It is a history of two families during two generations, and all transpires under their two roofs. The genealogy is a little perplexing, and as an assistance to the reader's recollection we give it in a note.²

If we did not know that this book has been read by thousands of young ladies in the country, we should esteem it our first duty to caution them against it simply

on account of the coarseness of the style. We are so far pedantic as to agree with John Kemble in thinking that "oblige" is more becoming to royal mouths than "obleege." With ladies who should be habituated to the use of forms of speech like those which occur in every page of this book, we can see how a gentleman should altogether fail in any attempt at love-making, though he might be able to hold discourse with a western boatman in his own dialect, and be so well accustomed to the language of bar-rooms and steamboat saloons, that he could hear the eyes and souls of those around him "condemned," to use the words of Mrs. Isabella Heathcliff, "to a perpetual dwelling in the infernal regions," without experiencing the slightest inconvenience. . . .

Suppose this book were not written with so much power and subtlety, and with so large an infusion of genuine truth and beauty, the judgment of the public would at once condemn it on account of its coarseness of style. It would then be seen how much of the coarseness was affected and how much natural. But ought the other qualities of the book, which render us almost insensible, while we are reading it, to a language which, to say the least, was never that of well-bred ladies and gentlemen, to excuse this language—even considering the coarseness wholly unaffected and unavoidable—a part of the substance of the writer's very self?

We think not. The book is original; it is powerful; full of suggestiveness. But still it is *coarse*. The narrative talks on in a way that if an attempt to imitate it be ever made in a parlor, the experimenter should be speedily ejected. It ought to be banished from refined society, because it does not converse in a proper manner. Setting aside the profanity, which if a writer introduces into a book, he offends against both politeness and good morals, there is such a general roughness and savageness in the soliloquies and dialogues here given as never should be found in a work of art. The whole tone of the style of the book smacks of lowness. It would indicate that the writer was not accustomed to the society of gentlemen, and was not afraid, indeed, rather gloried, in showing it. . . .

But the taint of vulgarity with our author extends deeper than mere snobbishness; he is rude, because he prefers to be so. In the outset he represents himself as a misanthropist, and confesses to a degree of reserve which it would puzzle a psychologist to explain:—

The "walk in" was uttered with closed teeth, and expressed the sentiment, "Go to the Deuce!" Even the gate over which he leaned manifested no sympathizing movement to the words; and I think that circumstance determined me to accept the invitation: I felt interested in a man who seemed more *exaggeratedly reserved* than myself.

"Exaggeratedly reserved"—another Jeamesism.

While enjoying a month of fine weather at the sea-coast, I was thrown into the company of a most fascinating creature, a real goddess, in my eyes, as long as she took no notice of me. I "never told my love" vocally; still, if looks have language, the merest idiot might have guessed I was over head and ears; she understood me, at last, and looked a return—the sweetest of all imaginable looks—and what did I do? I confess it with shame—shrunk icily into myself, like a snail, at every glance retired colder and farther; till, finally, the poor innocent was led to doubt her own senses, and, overwhelmed with confusion at her supposed mistake, persuaded her mamma to decamp.

This is a phase of human nature which we had rather not understand. If it ever was real with any living man, he was a very bad-hearted one, and a conceited. More likely the real truth with one who would write himself so affected a personage, was just the reverse—that some gay girl, seeing in him a person on agreeable terms with himself, experimented on him for her diversion, till she made him "deucedly miserable." It is evident that the author has suffered, not disappointment in love, but some great mortification of pride. Possibly his position in society has given him manners that have prevented him from associating with those among whom he feels he has intellect enough to be classed, and he is thus in reality the misanthropist he claims to be. Very likely he may be a young person who has spent his life, until within a few years, in some isolated town in the North of England. It is only by some such supposition that his peculiarities of style and thought can be accounted for. He is one who is evidently unfamiliar with, and careless of acquiring, the habits of refined society.

We regret the necessity of proving his intentional and affected coarseness by examples. In the first place, several of the characters swear worse than ever the troops did in Flanders. Now, setting out of the question the morality or immorality of this practice, it is, as we have already observed, an offence against politeness; not such a great one, however, but it is esteemed venial when used effectively by military or naval gentlemen, who have seen some service. It is not permitted to civilians in general society, though a little Mantalini "demmit," escaping between the teeth in the heat of an argument, is readily overlooked. But common, rough swearing is a worse breach of decorum than disregarding the conveniences for tobacco saliva. And how much more in writing than in conversation! For a writer is presumed to be deliberate; he corrects his proofs at leisure. If a writer, therefore, permits his characters to swear, and that grossly, (not like gentlemen,) he does it *knowingly*; he is aware that it is not customary or mannerly, and every time he does it, he is, therefore, intentionally rude.

But the writer's disposition to be coarse is, perhaps, still more clearly shown by examples like the following:—

I was surprised to see Heathcliff there also. He stood by the fire, his back toward me, just finishing a stormy scene to poor Zillah, who ever and anon interrupted her labor to pluck up the corner of her apron, and heave an indignant groan.

"And you, you worthless——" he broke out as I entered, turning to his daughter-in-law, and employing an epithet as harmless as duck, or sheep, but generally represented by a dash.

Had the writer been simply, unconsciously coarse, he would, in this instance, have said "slut" or "bitch," without adverting to the harmlessness of the word. But by alluding to its harmlessness, he at once uses it, and offers a defence of it. This as plainly evinces a conscious determination to write coarsely, as if he had quoted and defended a passage from Rabelais. He knew the word to be a low word, though not an immodest one, and he determined to show his bold independence by using and defending it. He was anxious to extend the resources of the English language. This and hundreds of other sentences show that he has got the maggot in his brain, that low words are the strongest, and low manners the most natural. He desired to write a book with "no nonsense about it," and he has, therefore, been led into the affecting boorishness. . . .

The influence which this book cannot but have upon manners, must be bad. For the coarseness extends farther than the mere style; it extends *all through*; and the crude style and rude expressions are too much in keeping with the necessary situations. It deals constantly in exaggerated extremes of passion. From the beginning to the end, there is hardly a scene which does not place the actors in the most agonizing or antagonizing predicament possible. Let the reader run over the principal events of the story in his mind, and consider what a series of scenes it would make, if dramatized and placed upon the stage.

Mr. Lockwood visits Mr. Heathcliff, and is attacked by sheep dogs in his parlor. He visits him again and is caught in the snow; the dogs fly at him, his nose bleeds, Zillah pours a pint of ice water down his back and puts him to bed in a haunted chamber, where he has a terrible dream.

Mrs. Dean then begins her tale, and in the first chapter we have a fight between Heathcliff and Hindley. Then Mr. Earnshaw dies in his chair. Heathcliff and Cathy run away to the grange, and he is degraded for it. They lead a dreadful life with Hindley, who becomes a drunkard. Edgar Linton visits Catherine and falls in love; she, after nearly knocking him over with a blow on the face, accepts him.

But we will not continue the catalogue of scenes of the most disgusting violence, of which the remainder of the book is almost wholly made up. Catherine's election of

Linton and her reasons for it, as it is the main incident of the story, may be most properly taken to examine the *naturalness* of the passion. She at last makes a confidant of Nelly:—

"Nelly, I see now, you think me a selfish wretch, but did it never strike you that if Heathcliff and I married we should be beggars? whereas, if I married Linton, I can aid Heathcliff to rise, and place him out of my brother's power."

"With your husband's money, Miss Catherine?" I asked. "You'll find him not so pliable as you calculate upon; and, though I'm hardly a judge, I think that's the worst motive you've given yet for being the wife of young Linton."

"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 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; and——"

She paused, and hid her face in the folds of my gown; but I jerked it forcibly away. I was out of patience with her folly.

"If I can make any sense of your nonsense, miss," I said, "it only goes to convince me that you are ignorant of the duties you undertake in marrying, or else that you are a wicked, unprincipled girl."

Now, if Catherine could have found Heathcliff the same night; if he had not run away just at that juncture, and left her to a long brain fever, and finally to a marriage with Linton; if they could have met but an instant, the reader is made to feel that all would be well. What she here utters was but the passing fancy of an extremely capricious, ungoverned girl; her better reason, could it have availed in time, might have brought her to her senses. And so we are wrought upon to love her to the last. . . .

Yet with all this faultiness, *Wuthering Heights* is, undoubtedly, a work of many singular merits. In the first place it is not a novel which deals with the shows of society, the surfaces and conventionalities of life. It

does not depict men and women guided merely by motives intelligible to simplest observers. It lifts the veil and shows boldly the dark side of our depraved nature. It teaches how little the ends of life in the young are rough hewn by experience and benevolence in the old. It goes into the under-current of passion, and the rapid hold it has taken of the public shows how much truth there is hidden under its coarse extravagance. . . .

Next to the merit of this novel as a work of thought and subtle insight, is its great power as a work of the imagination. In this respect it must take rank very high, if not among the highest. It is not flowingly written; the author can hardly be an easy writer. Yet he has the power, with all his faults of style, of sometimes flashing a picture upon the eye, and the feeling with it, in a few sentences. The snow-storm which occurs in the second and third chapters of the first volume, is an example. But the effect of the description is often marred by consciously chosen fine words; as for instance, the word "shimmering" in one of the extracts first quoted.

The dialogue is also singularly effective and dramatic. The principal characters all talk alike; yet they stand before us as definite as so many individuals. In this respect the book reminds us of the *Five Nights of St. Albans*. It is like that also somewhat, in the tone of the fancy; the dream in the opening might have been conceived by the author of the *Five Nights*; the effect is so like some of his own. Yet this novel has none of the loftiness of that splendid romance; and whatever it may be as a work of genius and ability, is not worthy to be named with it as a work of art.

That it is original all who have read it need not be told. It is *very* original. And this is the reason of its popularity. It comes upon a sated public a new sensation. Nothing like it has ever been written before; it is to be hoped that in respect of its faults, for the sake of good manners, nothing will be hereafter. Let it stand by itself, a coarse, original, powerful book,—one that does not give us true characters, but horribly striking and effective ones. It will live a short and brilliant life, and then die and be forgotten. For when the originality becomes familiarized, there will not be truth enough left to sustain it. The public will not acknowledge its men and women to have the true immortal vitality. Poor Cathy's ghost will not walk the earth forever; and the insane Heathcliff will soon rest quietly in his coveted repose.

We are not aware that anything has been written upon the rank that ought to be assigned to such works as *Wuthering Heights* in fictitious literature. In conversation we have heard it spoken of by some as next in merit to Shakspeare for depth of insight and dramatic power; while others have confessed themselves unable to get through it. But all agree that it affects them somewhat unpleasantly. It is written in a morbid phase of the

mind, and is sustained so admirably that it communicates this sickliness to the reader. It does in truth lay bare some of the secret springs of human action with wonderful clearness; but still it dissects character as with a broad-axe—chops out some of the great passions, sets them together and makes us almost believe the combinations to be real men and women. It abounds in effective description, is very individual, and preserves the unity of its peculiar gloomy phase of mind from first to last. Yet the reader rises from its conclusion with the feeling of one passing from a sick chamber to a comfortable parlor, or going forth after a melancholy rain, into a dry, clear day.

Notes

1. *Wuthering Heights*. A Novel. By the Author of *Jane Eyre*. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1846.
2. Old Mr. Earnshaw of *Wuthering Heights* has two children, Hindley and Catherine. He finds Heathcliff, a gipsy boy, in Liverpool streets, and brings him home. When he dies, Hindley brings home a foreign wife, Frances. Old Mr. and Mrs. Linton, of Thrushcross Grange, have two children, Edgar and Isabella. In 1778 Hindley's wife gives birth to a son, Hareton, and dies. Old Mr. and Mrs. Linton die, and Edgar Linton marries Catherine Earnshaw. Heathcliff marries Isabella. Mrs. Linton (Catherine) gives birth to a daughter, and dies; the daughter takes her name. Heathcliff's wife dies, leaving a son, Linton. Hindley Earnshaw dies. Heathcliff's son, Linton, marries Edgar Linton's daughter Catherine. Edgar Linton dies. Heathcliff's son dies. Heathcliff himself dies; and finally Hareton Earnshaw and the widow of Heathcliff's son are left with a fair prospect of a happy marriage.

Galaxy (review date February 1873)

SOURCE: "The Life and Writings of Emily Brontë (Ellis Bell)." *Galaxy* 15, no. 2 (February 1873): 226-38.

[In the following excerpt, the anonymous reviewer praises Brontë's evocation of life on the English moors in *Wuthering Heights*, while criticizing the novel as too improbable and grim to be read as realistic. The reviewer pays particular attention to the character of Heathcliff, concluding that the extreme intensity of his passion and brutality ultimately renders him implausible.]

No amount of sophistry would persuade any one that Heathcliff was a noble nature, warped by adverse circumstances; or that the elder Catherine was anything but fierce, faithless, and foolish; or that such a swift

succession of acts of coarse cruelty was probable or even possible in any Yorkshire manor-house, however isolated; or, finally, that an upper servant could ever have adorned a narrative with passages so eloquent and so elegant as those with which Nelly Dean not unfrequently adorns hers. But if *Wuthering Heights* admits in some respects neither of defence nor eulogium, still less does it deserve the wholesale condemnation and unqualified abuse which have been heaped upon it. Though a brutal, it is not a sensual book; though coarse, it is not vulgar; though bad, it is not indecent. The passion of Heathcliff for Catherine, though it is "a passion such as might boil and glow in the essence of some evil genius," is still a passion of soul for soul; and full of savage ferocity as the whole story is, it contains some exquisite pictures of childlike simplicity and innocence, which open upon us like glimpses of blue in a stormy sky; and there are bits of moorland, and dimly lighted and quaint interiors, and here and there a grand outline of distant hills, and grander stretch of sky, which are drawn by a master hand, and are like lilies among thorns, as compared with the coarseness, fierceness, and brutality of the rest of the narrative. In regard to the creation of Heathcliff—that strange being, neither man nor demon, nor apparently bearing any relation to anything in the heavens above or in the earth beneath—Charlotte Brontë has thus written in her eloquent preface to *Wuthering Heights*: "Whether it is right or advisable to create beings like Heathcliffs, I do not know: I scarcely think it is. But this I know; the writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master—something that at times strangely wills and works for itself. . . ."

The scene of *Wuthering Heights* is laid in an old north country manor-house, in the West Riding of Yorkshire, and the time is early in the present century. The hero of the book is a foundling, or waif, or stray, picked up by the master of the house in a journey to Liverpool, and educated by him together with his children. The elder of these children, the son and heir, treats him with extreme cruelty and injustice, and his revenge for this treatment, and his passionate attachment for the younger child, a little girl, form the keynote of the story, in which, however, plot is so entirely subordinate to delineation of character and description of scenery, that the extracts we shall make are selected for their intrinsic beauty or power, and not in order to illustrate the development of the plot.

Emily shared Charlotte's rare power of making the unreal vividly real to the reader. Throughout the whole of this narrative, the atmosphere of reality is so well kept up, that we recall it afterward as an experience, and seem to have lived through the lives and to have seen the places which it describes.

The grim old manor-house, with its belt of stunted firs, "all blown aslant" by the fierce winds; the wide, gray

moor stretching away into the distance on every side; the sombre interior and sombre inmates of the "Heights"—how vividly real they are made to us! How strangely familiar is the aspect of the desolate chamber where Lockwood lies down to sleep, with the moaning wind for a lullaby and the frozen fir bough drawing its icy fingers ceaselessly along the lattice. How marvelously is the picture of his nightmare given, blending as it does so naturally with the black, stormy night, the wild wind, and the dreary old house; and how admirably is the deathless passion of Heathcliff for Catherine introduced, in all its weird power, as, "believing himself to be alone," he wrenches open the lattice and stretches out hands of wild yearning to the pitiless night, with that cry of anguish: "Cathy! oh my heart's darling! Hear me this once, Catherine, at last!" The keynote of his life's tragedy is struck in that vain appeal; and the deep night, the driving snow, the moaning wind form a fitting accompaniment to its passion and its pain. . . .

Heathcliff's conduct proceeds in a great measure from the entire absorption of all his faculties in one idea; but even admitting that view of the case, he is not human, and not being human he is not real. We do not feel this at first; the pure but powerful narrative style in which his history is written, the perfect and direct simplicity with which all his acts and feelings are described, the exquisite fidelity to nature, and to nature in some of her simplest and most every-day aspects, manifested in the description of his surroundings, the absence of melodrama, and finally, the great "though unconscious art with which the whole is managed," all combine to make us forget while we read, and shudder at the wickedness and woe of that lost soul, that such a living man could have existed. Not that many worse men than Heathcliff have not existed, but just such a character could not exist; and the longer we analyze it the more fully we are convinced that he is no man, but the freak of a fine though fevered fancy, in that fancy's infancy. We have already quoted what Charlotte Brontë alleges as an excuse for the creation of such a being, namely, that those who are possessed of the creative faculty own something which they cannot control. Perhaps another excuse may be found in the fact that when a woman's imagination possesses virile fire and power, it is apt in its first essays to project itself as far as possible from the beaten track of feminine grace and refinement, to delight in the sombre and the lurid, and to indulge in displays of strength which are too often uncouth and savage, because unmeasured and uncontrolled. There is a "sowing of wild oats" in art and literature as well as in life; that is, if we take the "sowing of wild oats" to mean what it originally did mean, the first outbreaks of the tumult of youth—tumult inevitable in strong and varied natures, and not to be regretted, because tumult means life, and out of such outbreaks gradually grows the power which, when properly directed, will do a great work in the world. Such is the only explanation,