Esther Schönberger-Schleicher

Charlotte and Emily Brontë

A Narrative Analysis of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*

Esther Schönberger-Schleicher

Charlotte and Emily Brontë

A Narrative Analysis of *Jane Eyre*
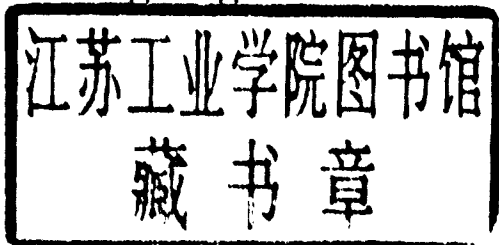and *Wuthering Heights*

PETER LANG

This thesis was accepted as a doctoral dissertation by the
Faculty of Arts of the University of Zurich in the summer semester 1998
on the recommendation of Professor Dr. Max Nänny.

Printed in Germany

Charlotte and Emily Brontë

European University Studies
Europäische Hochschulschriften
Publications Universitaires Européennes

Series XIV
Anglo-Saxon Language and Literature

Reihe XIV   Série XIV
Angelsächsische Sprache und Literatur
Langue et littérature anglo-saxonnes

Vol./Band 350

*This book is dedicated with love
to the memory of my dear father
Richard Schleicher
and to my dear mother,
Verena Schleicher-Klausner
and, above all, to my husband
Thomas Schönberger.*

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the many people who have helped me accomplish this study. First of all, I wish to thank my supervisor, Professor Dr. Max Nänny, for his valuable advice and friendly support. I am obliged to him for his participation in planning the overall conception and for various stimulating discussions. I am also sincerely indebted to Professor Hillis Miller, who took true interest in my study and who offered helpful criticism and guided me with his perceptive comments and advice. Moreover, I wish to thank Barbara Cohen, who corrected my manuscript with the greatest possible diligence, patience and care, and Regula Bisang, who read my dissertation with genuine interest providing me with essential comments and stimulating advice. I am also very grateful to Yvonne Kaspar who assisted me in drawing some charts and with whom I spent many hours bent over the computer.

My warmest thanks go to my husband, Thomas Schönberger, who helped me in the course of many hours to get the manuscript into its best possible shape. His profound belief in me was a constant source of encouragement. His interest in my work and his true support motivated me time and again. Without his patience and love this book might never have been completed.

Zürich, 1998   *Esther Schönberger-Schleicher*

Table of Contents

1 Introduction

Two women whose lives ran along exceptionally parallel lines – two works that could hardly be more different. Their lives have often been compared but their works have never been the object of a systematic comparative reading based on modern narrative theory. It was the amazing opposition between the similarity of Charlotte and Emily Brontë's lives and the difference of their works that first caught my attention in reading *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. Starting out from the question of whether the similarity of the two authors' lives would be reflected in the deep structures of their novels, I soon realized that a structural analysis revealed idiosyncratic narrative modes that were worth comparing and contrasting for their own sake, independently of the two authors' lives.

Both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* are remarkable books that have fascinated generations of readers. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, Charlotte and Emily Brontë have established themselves in Victorian literature next to names such as Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, and George Eliot. An astonishing number of publications have dealt with the Brontë sisters: their lives, their fictional work, and their poetry. Thus, apart from biographical studies dealing with the two sisters' upbringing and the special atmosphere they lived and worked in, there are various books and articles that discuss the Brontë sisters' approach to writing, their metaphorical language or the Victorian subject-matter of their works. Mcre recently the Brontës have caught the interest of feminist critics who emphasize their positions as women writers at a time when only few women were able to establish themselves as creative artists.

Novels have always fascinated me by giving me access to a fictional world that has its own rules and regulations. I look at a novel as a piece of craftsmanship that is planned by the author to give the reader, among other things, as much pleasure as possible. The author is the creator of a fictional world and decides what story is told and how it is told. The author thus produces a narrative structure that governs the story of a novel. From a reader's viewpoint the study of the structural aspects in a novel can reveal the author's creative power, since the structure of a literary work not only contributes to the meaning of the work but is itself part of that meaning.

My present study focuses on narrative aspects in *Jane Eyre* and in *Wuthering Heights*. I will analyze the two fictional works in order to demonstrate that the strength and the weakness of each novel can be discovered on the structural level as well as on the content level. A close study of the narrative devices applied by the Brontë sisters will highlight subtleties of their art. Concepts of narrative theory will be mirrored on *Jane Eyre* and on *Wuthering Heights* in

order to work out contrasting and unifying principles that govern the literary art of the two sisters.

The reason why I chose a comparative approach is twofold. When I read the two novels for the first time, I detected the two sisters' similar attitudes toward class distinction. As a result of that, I began to wonder how it was possible to represent a similar topic in such a way as to make a completely different impression on the reader. My interest in a comparative approach increased when I studied the biographies of the two sisters. After that I wanted to find out whether the two women's common experience in terms of their upbringing, environment, education, their journey to Belgium and their interest in literature had left an imprint on their literary art that could be discovered in their novels. I came to the conclusion that a comparison of the narrative devices adopted by the two Brontë sisters is precisely the ground on which I would like to base my study.

Research reveals that many critics have dealt with particular narrative aspects found in the works of the two Brontë sisters, but little has been done along the lines of a comparative and contrastive reading of *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* in terms of narrative theory. Whereas studies of *Jane Eyre* such as those by Laurel Brinton, Joan D. Peters, and Edgar F. Shannon tend to focus their attention on discourse functions, most critics dealing with *Wuthering Heights*, among them N. M. Jacobs, Terence McCarthy, Beth Newman, Gideon Shunami, are preoccupied with the complex situation of narrative communication. Yet, amazingly enough, the first comparative readings of the two novels date back to the Brontë sisters' own lifetime. Charles Algernon Swinburne was one of the contemporary critics who recognized not only the value of *Jane Eyre* but also that of *Wuthering Heights*, in spite of what he called its „awkwardness of construction or presentation" (88). Some eighty years later, Virginia Woolf followed this comparative approach and proved her artistic sensitivity when she pointed out that one of the keys to the two novels is to be found in the way the characters are represented. She wrote that the I-narrator in *Jane Eyre* conveys the personal experiences of the author Charlotte Brontë, and that these coincide with the reader's own experiences. She claimed, furthermore, that the narrators of *Wuthering Heights* have the characters pronounce a far more general wisdom that represents „the whole human race". In *The Common Reader*, Virginia Woolf states:

> When Charlotte wrote she said with eloquence and splendour and passion „I love", „I hate", „I suffer". Her experience, though more intense, is on a level with our own. But there is no „I" in *Wuthering Heights*. There are no governesses. There are no employers. There is love, but it is not the love of men and women. Emily was inspired by some more general conception. The impulse which urged her to create was not her own suffering or her own injuries. She looked out upon a world cleft into gigantic disorder and felt within her the power

to unite it in a book. That gigantic ambition is to be felt throughout the novel – a struggle, half thwarted but of superb conviction, to say something through the mouths of her characters which is not merely „I love" or „I hate", but „we, the whole human race" and „you, the eternal powers...." (201-202)

Although Virginia Woolf's observation of the narrative situation is not based on narrative theory, it is clearly something that would be discussed there, as it touches on the question of character representation in narratives.

All in all, existing comparative readings of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* are not based on contemporary narrative theory while structuralist readings neglect the comparative approach that seems to impose itself. In my study, I am going to combine the two approaches by applying the concepts of recent narrative theories in a comparative reading of the Brontë sisters' two novels.

For the definition of the narrative areas in my study, I will rely on the narrative theories of Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Gérard Genette, Seymour Chatman, Hans-Werner Ludwig, Dorrit Cohn, and Franz K. Stanzel. I will follow the approach of French Structuralism by dividing my study into three narrative areas. These areas, however, I will call „Text", „Story", and „Narration", three terms I have adopted from Rimmon-Kenan.

Before I proceed with a more detailed introduction to my study, a brief outline of what distinguishes the three narrative areas seems to be called for. I will begin with „Text" because this is what is directly available to the reader when he opens a book[1]. „Text", as the word says, is what we read, the actual words on the page. What is essential, however, is that these words do not simply present events in chronological order, but they are arranged according to organizing principles specific to narrative in such a way as to produce certain effects on the reader.

„Story", on the other hand, denotes the events abstracted from their arrangement in „Text" and put in chronological order. „Story" is the „raw material" of narrative or what is loosely and perhaps in an old-fashioned way called „content". As „Story" is transformed into „Text", events are connected according to principles of temporal arrangement, which are often non-chronological, and according to principles of causality. At the same time, events are linked with participants. The reader's interest is usually caught by the story: he tries to find out what happened to whom, and when, where, how, and why. Yet, the only way for the reader to get to the story is through „Text" — by following the words on the page, he traces narrative sequences, or story-lines,

---

1 In my study I will always refer to the reader as he, not because I exclude female readers, but because I want to avoid any of the available alternative forms that not only seem awkward but imply a feminist stance.

which are usually linked by the protagonists and eventually add up to the narrative as a whole.

„Narration" finally, the third narrative area, deals with the production of written or spoken discourse in a work of fiction. In other words, „Narration" deals with the ways in which a story is told, and more precisely with discourse situations and with the *representation* of discourse situations, with the different voices in a text. „Narration", then, focuses on the narrator or narrators, whose presence or absence as well as the degree of their perceptibility is what puts a distinctive mark on a given narrative.

From this brief outline it should have become clear that the three narrative areas are interrelated. It is impossible to define one area without referring to one or both of the others. Textual arrangements cannot be described without acknowledging the existence of events, and events would not exist in the text if they were not narrated. It is only the unity of the three that makes a narrative complete.

My study will show what different effects are produced in *Jane Eyre* and in *Wuthering Heights* in the way narrative devices are used. By comparing the results, I will point out from a structural viewpoint what the success of each novel is based on. My investigation is basically empirical, and the data that give evidence of the occurrence and frequency of the narrative features in the two novels can be found in the Appendix. The quotations to support my arguments are taken from the Penguin edition of both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*.

The first part, „Text", deals with the temporal arrangement of events in the novels of the two Brontë sisters. The categories of temporal order and duration will be examined by means of a selection of representative quotations from the two novels. I will focus my attention on the different organizing principles that the two sisters apply, and I will demonstrate the distinct effects these principles produce and the influence they have on the narrative pace. Since these narrative devices are noticed by the reader as interruptions of the story-time, I will also include at this point a discussion of present tense passages, in spite of the fact that, strictly speaking, both narrator's comments and passages in the historical present belong to the area of „Narration" and reveal something of the role of the narrator. As the three narrative areas are so strongly interrelated, it did not seem useful to me to separate these elements of „Narration" and „Text" in this part of my study, which proves once again that the theoretical subdivision does not always prove practical when dealing with fiction.

The second part, „Story", considers the succession of events and the links that join them into story-lines. „Story" contains the construction of a fictional „world" in which events take place and protagonists act. Consequently a detailed discussion of „Story" will include the temporal arrangement of the events, their links, as well as the roles and functions of the protagonists.

Whereas the study of temporal succession will reveal the planning minds of the two authors, the causal links will emphasize their power of imagination and their perception of the fictional „reality". Though I have already mentioned a thematic correspondence between the two novels, it will become apparent that the two Brontë sisters have chosen different strategies in telling their stories. While analyzing their distinct story-lines, I hope to show how structures create meaning and determine reading.

A considerable part of my chapter on „Story" will be devoted to character analysis. I will try to demonstrate that both sisters paid careful attention to the way they represented their protagonists. The discussion of character traits will reveal a correspondence of the two sisters with respect to the function and the representation of the protagonists. It will be my aim to show that in contrast to the different plots of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, there exist similarities when it comes to the application of certain narrative techniques in the presentation of characters.

The third part, „Narration", completes my discussion of narrative areas. I will first provide a general introduction to different approaches to narrative situations before I will analyze „Narration" in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. A theoretical digression will be necessary at that point due to the lack of consensus that exists among narrative theorists when it comes to the narrative communication situation. In the subsequent analysis of the temporal relations between the narrators and the narrated events as well as in my analysis of the narrative levels of the two novels, I will primarily rely on the narrative approach of Rimmon-Kenan and Genette. Though their theories do not always correspond, they still follow the same main direction.

Both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* are first person narratives. The study of temporal relations therefore, involves in both novels, the distinction between the „narrating I" and the „experiencing I", who act on two different narrative levels. However, a close examination of the two novels will soon reveal that the common ground for comparison is restricted, and that the greater complexity of the narrative structure of *Wuthering Heights* is to be found in the number of first person narrators who are allowed to tell their tale at different times. In the section on narrative levels the focus of attention will therefore be shifted to the principles of narrative subordination that are applied in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. The question that will have to be answered is what implications different narrative levels have for the story.

With the focus still on the narrators, their role will next be inspected. After a detailed discussion of the degrees of their perceptibility and of their reliability, I will provide a typology of the narrators in both novels. This should help to determine in what way the Brontë sisters try to influence their readers' perceptions, which in turn should assist in a better understanding of their novels.

The last section of the chapter on „Narration" will be devoted to speech representation. The narrator's dominance in a narrative can be revealed by the amount of control he exerts over the characters' speech. The less the narrator appears in the story, the more room is given to the representation of the characters' own speech. Therefore, this sub-chapter will also allow further insight into the characters themselves and will verify or contradict their position as chief protagonists.

In the final chapter of my study I will, based on the results of my analyses, sum up what distinguishes the narrative art of the two Brontë sisters and what made them unforgettable representatives of their era. I will also point out the advantages and disadvantages of this kind of structural analysis, since it is only through a self-critical application of narrative theory that I can make a significant contribution to literary studies.