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CLASSIC

WUTHERING HEIGHTS

EMILY BRONTË

Includes detailed explanatory notes,
an overview of key themes, and more

WUTHERING HEIGHTS



Emily Brontë

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INTRODUCTION
Wuthering Heights:
A HAUNTING TALE OF LOVE AND REVENGE



When *Wuthering Heights* was first published in 1847 just a year before its author's untimely death, critics did not know how to respond. Some were struck by the savage beauty of the writing and of the story itself, an intricate narrative winding darkly about the moors. Some were offended by those same things, and by Emily Brontë's reluctance to offer any sort of moral judgment upon her characters. Others simply found the novel to be overwrought and melodramatic, rife with ghosts and hallucinations, early death, and brooding lovers haunting the gloomy landscape of northern England.

Why, then, has *Wuthering Heights* remained popular for more than 150 years? In part, the novel's success stems from its moral ambiguity. Brontë leaves it up to her readers to draw their own conclusions about the fates and faults of her characters, and this has allowed each generation of readers to form new opinions about the book. The story itself is also undeniably fascinating. It is a sweeping saga of the destructive, passionate rela-

tionships between two families, set in an untamed landscape that seems so alive it is almost a character in itself. The scope and setting of the book and the stormy love affairs it chronicles make *Wuthering Heights* wildly cinematic—and, indeed, the story has been adapted for the screen several times.

Wuthering Heights has always defied definition. It features elements of many literary genres—romantic tragedy, ghost story, family epic, landscape fiction—but does not precisely fit any one category. This transcendence gives the novel its haunting power. There is no easy interpretation. There are no outside judgments. There are no preset literary categories. Each reader must wrestle *Wuthering Heights* individually, on its own terms.

The Life and Work of Emily Brontë

Emily Brontë is perhaps the most beguiling and mysterious of the enigmatic Brontë sisters. Born Emily Jane Brontë in 1818, she lived most of her short life in the Yorkshire moors that she immortalized in *Wuthering Heights*. The daughter of the Reverend Patrick and Maria Brontë, she was the fifth in a family of six children, growing up in a stone parsonage in a village called Haworth. When Emily was only two years old, just after the birth of her sister Anne, their mother Maria died. The young Brontës were sent to a school for poor children of clergymen, a dreadful place that inspired the fictional school in Emily's sister Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Emily's older sisters, Elizabeth and Maria, died of tuberculosis there, and the remaining children came home to Haworth, where they were cared for by an aunt.

Poetry, history, and politics were among the conversation topics at home. Such talk fed the active imaginations of the four Brontë children. When Branwell, the only son, was presented with a box of wooden soldiers, all four children immediately adopted a soldier as their own character. Emily's was meant to represent a descendent of Sir Walter Scott, the Scottish Romantic poet and novelist famous for his long narrative poem "The Lady of the Lake," and one of her foremost heroes. Led by the two eldest, Charlotte and Branwell, the Brontë children began to write and perform little plays about the soldiers and the imaginary worlds in which they lived. The plays became stories, copied into tiny booklets, and eventually developed into two on-going sagas, one composed largely by Charlotte and Branwell, and the other, set on the fictional island of Gondal, by Emily and Anne. Gondal was populated by characters who resembled the gruff, weathered types in their own hometown. Emily would continue to write poems and prose about Gondal for the rest of her life.

Of the three writing Brontë sisters, Emily was the most peculiar, with a guarded, difficult personality that many took to be rude. Reclusive and nontalkative, she attended to her chores with a dutiful, stoic nature. Pale-complexioned with eyes that appeared gray, she dressed oddly, choosing dramatic purple fabric with lightning bolt patterns to sew on her dresses. Only while roaming the moors did she become truly alive, revealing her inner, free-spirited nature, running among the streams and rocks for hours, no matter the weather or season. In fact, during the brief times she spent away from Haworth, at school in Brussels with

Charlotte as a young woman, she became homesick and physically ill.

Emily initially kept her poems to herself. When Charlotte discovered Emily's writing, she managed to convince her sister to publish her work, together with Charlotte's, in a volume of poetry. Anne was beginning to write her own novel, later published as *Agnes Grey*, and Branwell, though he would never publish his writing, was also at work on a novel.

Charlotte, the most ambitious of the three Brontë sisters, attracted the attention of a publisher who put out *Jane Eyre* to much acclaim. The three young women were well aware of the prejudices of the time against female writers and chose to adopt masculine-sounding pen names of Currer (Charlotte), Ellis (Emily), and Acton (Anne) Bell. When *Wuthering Heights* was published in 1847, these pen names caused much confusion, and it was often assumed that *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* were written by the same person. Emily's novel was badly edited and received mixed reviews.

Nonetheless, Emily began work on a second novel. In 1848, a year after the publication of *Wuthering Heights*, Branwell died of tuberculosis. Emily caught a cold at his funeral, which, with her typical stoicism, she ignored. The cold steadily developed into a far more serious illness, but Emily refused all medical advice.

At the last, barely capable of breathing without going into a fit of coughing, she steadfastly attended to her usual chores. After Emily had been ill for nearly two months, on December 19, 1848, she broke down, saying to Charlotte, "If you send for a doctor, I will see him." But she died before help could arrive, by this

time her body was so frail that her coffin was only sixteen inches wide. And yet, she is remembered as Charlotte once described her: "Stronger than a man, simpler than a child, her nature stood alone."

Historical and Literary Context of *Wuthering Heights*

Romanticism, Imperialism, and Industrialization

Emily Brontë was born after the peak of the Romantic period, on the cusp of the Victorian era. Like many English men and women living in the midst of the Industrial Revolution, she looked nostalgically back at the preceding era, noticeably so in *Wuthering Heights*.

Wuthering Heights is set squarely during the Romantic era, beginning and ending in 1801, with the main story covering the thirty years spanning 1771–1801. The exact dates of the Romantic era are debatable, but most historians link the beginning of the movement to the onset of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras in France, as well as the years immediately following the American Revolution.

The revolutions in France and America set off a new current of thinking throughout the world, particularly in England, where intellectuals, liberals, and radicals resoundingly echoed their support. Mary Wollstonecraft upheld the ideals of the French Revolution in *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1792) and Thomas Paine answered Edmund Burke's attack on the French Revolution (*Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790) with *Rights of Man* (1791–92), in which he not

only defended and justified the French Revolution, but argued that England could achieve a democratic republic government through a similar popular uprising. The English primarily supported the radical ideals of the French Revolution: support for the Continent began to fall off as the movement took a more violent turn with the Jacobins' rise to power, the execution of the royal family, and lastly, the Reign of Terror (1793-94), during which time thousands were executed at the guillotine.

In England, the Romantic era was one of the most turbulent in history. England experienced the growing pains that accompanied the country's transformation from a traditional, aristocratic agricultural society to a modern industrial nation. England pioneered many industrial inventions, including the first iron bridge, the first railroad, and the first efficient steel-making factory. And as it modernized at home, it expanded abroad. The British empire continued to grow around the world. During the Romantic era, England extended its colonial presence to include countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Australia, and Sierra Leone.

Industrialism and imperialism even further delineated the already rigid social class structure in England. The lavish lives of the leisure class, those who populated Romantic author Jane Austen's novels of manners, grew even more lavish, their lives practically untouched by international events. Meanwhile, the lower laboring classes suffered under harsh conditions in the wake of the new industrial age, which employed women and children at inadequate wages for long, grueling hours in coal mines and factories.

The Romantic Movement in Literature

The changing political and economic climate gave rise to a radical new movement in literature. In 1798, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge anonymously published their *Lyrical Ballads*, which Wordsworth then followed up with a second edition two years later. The preface to the second edition comprises Wordsworth's radical manifesto of poetry, and sums up the spirit of the age, defining poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings."

Wordsworth and Coleridge, along with William Blake, Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and John Keats, formed the core of what became known as the Romantic movement in poetry and literature. These poets espoused similar ideals and characteristics. Certainly, these ideals had a significant impact on the creation of *Wuthering Heights*.

Romantic literature is marked by a rejection of the cool rationality of the eighteenth century. Instead, Romantics championed individualism, imagination, emotion, and the transcendent beauty and power of nature. Wordsworth challenged the notion that poetry must be written in stylized language for upper-class audiences. In his Preface, he asserted that he wished to portray "incidents and situations from common life" and use a "selection of language really spoken by men." Common, working-class characters and phonetic representations of regional dialects appear regularly in Romantic poetry and fiction.

Emily Brontë's work also owes a debt to the Gothic novels of the Romantic era. Works such as Mary Shelley's famous *Frankenstein* (1818) made Gothic fic-

tion popular. Gothic novels usually featured decaying mansions, bleak landscapes, ghosts or monsters, and evil deeds. They exploited the macabre, and the dark, perverse parts of the human subconscious. Though not exactly Gothic (the novel fits no category exactly), *Wuthering Heights* has much in common with these dark works of the imagination.

Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott, both prominent novelists of this period, were especially strong influences on Emily Brontë as well. Brontë shares with Austen a tendency to write from her own limited realm of experience. Scott's novels were largely sweeping, grandiose, historical romances, the influence of which is obvious in *Wuthering Heights*.

CHRONOLOGY OF EMILY BRONTË'S LIFE AND WORK



- 1818: Emily Jane Brontë born at Thornton, near Bradford, Yorkshire, July 30.
- 1820: In April, the Brontë family moves to Haworth, after their last child, Anne, is born.
- 1821: Mrs. Brontë dies in September.
- 1824: In November, Emily Brontë enrolls at the Cowan Bridge School.
- 1825: May 6, Maria Brontë dies; June 1, Charlotte and Emily leave Cowan Bridge; June 15, Elizabeth Brontë dies.
- 1835: Emily attends Roe Head School, where Charlotte is a teacher, but grows seriously ill after three months and is sent home to Haworth.
- 1836: Emily's first dated poem, "Will the Day Be Bright."
- 1837: Emily teaches briefly at Law Hill School in Halifax.

- 1838–1842: Over half of Emily's surviving poems are written during this period.
- 1845: Charlotte "accidentally" discovers Emily's poems and convinces her sisters to collaborate on a volume of poems and prose. In December, Emily begins writing *Wuthering Heights*.
- 1846: Emily finishes *Wuthering Heights*.
- 1847: *Jane Eyre* is published by Smith, Elder and is well-received; *Wuthering Heights* is published by T. Newby with *Agnes Grey* in December.
- 1848: In October, Emily leaves home for what will be the last time to attend brother Branwell's funeral; there she catches a severe cold that develops into inflammation of the lungs; on December 19, Emily Brontë dies.
- 1849: Anne Brontë dies.
- 1850: *Wuthering Heights* reissued, with a selection of poems, and a biographical notice by Charlotte.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *Wuthering Heights*



Revolution and Romanticism

- 1760: Benjamin Franklin establishes the electrical nature of lightning through experiments using kites.
- 1764: James Hargreaves invents the spinning jenny for textile manufacture. Horace Walpole publishes *The Castle of Otranto*.
- 1769: James Watt patents his steam engine.
- 1771: Richard Arkwright produces the first textile spinning mill. Luigi Galvani discovers the electrical nature of nervous impulses.
- 1774: Joseph Priestley discovers oxygen.
- 1776: The American Declaration of Independence is signed in July.
- 1777: Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier establishes the oxygen and nitrogen basis of air.
- 1781: Immanuel Kant publishes the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

- 1785: James Watt and Matthew Boulton install a steam engine in an English cotton factory.
- 1789: The storming of the Bastille begins the French Revolution.
- 1791: Thomas Paine publishes *The Rights of Man*, Part I.
- 1792: Mary Wollstonecraft publishes *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.
- 1793: Reign of Terror begins in Paris.
- 1794: Robespierre is executed, ending the Reign of Terror.
- 1797: Coleridge writes "Kubla Khan" and the first version of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."
- 1800: Alessandro Volta develops the electric battery.
- 1806: The first steam-driven textile mill opens in Manchester, England.
- 1813: Jane Austen publishes *Pride and Prejudice*. Percy Shelley publishes *Queen Mab*.
- 1814: The British navy develops the first steam-driven warship. George Watson invents the steam locomotive.
- 1818: James Blundel, a London surgeon, performs the first successful human blood transfusion.
- 1825: The first railroad starts operation in England.
- 1837: Samuel Morse makes a public demonstration of the electric telegraph in New York.
- 1840: Charles Darwin publishes *Zoology of the Voyage of the Beagle*.
- 1848: The first Women's Rights convention is held in Seneca Falls, New York. Marx and Engels publish *The Communist Manifesto*.

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1801.—

I have just returned from a visit to my landlord—the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with. This is certainly a beautiful country! In all England, I do not believe that I could have fixed on a situation so completely removed from the stir of society. A perfect misanthropist's heaven: and Mr. Heathcliff and I are such a suitable pair to divide the desolation between us. A capital fellow! He little imagined how my heart warmed towards him when I beheld his black eyes withdraw so suspiciously under their brows, as I rode up, and when his fingers sheltered themselves, with a jealous resolution, still further in his waistcoat, as I announced my name.

“Mr. Heathcliff!” I said.

A nod was the answer.

“Mr. Lockwood, your new tenant, sir. I do myself the honour of calling as soon as possible after my arrival, to express the hope that I have not inconvenienced you by