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Wuthering Heights

By Richard Wasowski, M.A.

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- Examine an in-depth Character Analysis
- Acquire an understanding of the novel with Critical Essays
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This CliffsNotes study guide on Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* supplements the original literary work, giving you background information about the author, an introduction to the work, a graphical character map, critical commentaries, expanded glossaries, and a comprehensive index, all for you to use as an educational tool that will allow you to better understand *Wuthering Heights.* This study guide was written with the assumption that you have read *Wuthering Heights.* Reading a literary work doesn't mean that you immediately grasp the major themes and devices used by the author; this study guide will help supplement your reading to be sure you get all you can from Emily bronte's *Wuthering Heights.* CliffsNotes Review tests your comprehension of the original text and reinforces learning with questions and answers, practice projects, and more. For further information on Emily Bronte and *Wuthering Heights,* check out the CliffsNotes Resource Center.

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LIFE AND BACKGROUND OF THE AUTHOR

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The following abbreviated biography of Emily Bronte is provided so that you might become more familiar with her life and the historical times that possibly influenced her writing. Read this Life and Background of the Author section and recall it when reading Bronte's *Wuthering Heights,* thinking of any thematic relationship between Bronte's novel and her life.

Personal Background

"*Wuthering Heights* is a strange sort of book—baffling all regular criticism; yet, it is impossible to begin and not finish it; and quite as impossible to lay it aside afterwards and say nothing about it." This review, from *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper*, was one of the first receptions to Emily Brontë's novel, and concluded with the line, "we must leave it to our readers to decide what sort of a book it is." The conclusion in this review, which is the extent of praise the novel received on its publication, pertains not only to the novel *Wuthering Heights* but to Emily Brontë herself; it is up to readers to determine what type of writer Brontë was: Besides *Wuthering Heights*, only a few poems of hers exist and precious little of her personal history exists to complement those writings. Thus, in order to ascertain what type of writer Brontë was, critics must speculate based on a limited family history, some poems, and one excellent novel.

Brontë was one of six children born to Reverend Patrick Brontë and Maria Branwell Brontë. Born in Thornton, Yorkshire, England, on July 30, 1818, she was the sister of Maria, Elizabeth, Charlotte, Anne, and Branwell. Her family moved to Haworth when she was two years old, and here she first experienced the moors, a part of the Pennine Chain of mountains, andhere she lived until she died 30 years later.

A variety of conflicting influences shaped her life. Her father, of Irish descent, was known for his poetry and imagination even though he was the cleric. Her mother, a staunch Methodist, died when Emily was only three years old, so what she knew of her she learned from her siblings and her Aunt Elizabeth (Maria's sister), who raised the children after Maria's death. Elizabeth brought a religious fervor to the house that Brontë soon rejected.

Brontë's environment shaped her life and her work. The village of Haworth was isolated and surrounded by moors; thus, the one world she knew and lived in became the setting for her only novel. Paralleling her own life, she creates motherless characters in *Wuthering Heights*.

Writing was a means of amusement for the Brontë children. After the two oldest sisters died, the remaining siblings began writing plays and poems, creating a world called Angria and Gondal. These worlds became little books and the sources for later poetry and prose. Emily Brontë went to school, but she was unable to stay there. Possessing a reclusive nature, she had longings and desires for her home on the moors, which prompted her return home after a scant three months.

In the following year, 1837, she attempted to teach school. This endeavor lasted eight months, but she could not handle the stress and again returned home. In 1842 she went with Charlotte to Brussels to study foreign languages and school management in order to open a school in Haworth. Brontë had success there. One of her professors stated that she "had a head for logic and a capability for argument, unusual in a man, and rare indeed in a woman," but she returned to Haworth when her aunt died in 1843. Living with her father at the parsonage in Haworth, this became a period of creativity. Although the earliest dated poem is from 1836, the majority of her poetry that survives was written during this time.

Career Highlights

Like most authors, Emily Brontë was a product of her environment, and this directly influenced her writing. During her life she had no close friends, was interested in mysticism, and enjoyed her solitude outdoors. All of these elements grace both her poems and *Wuthering Heights.* In fact, many contemporary critics praise Emily Brontë first and foremost as a poet, marveling at the poetic nature of *Wuthering Heights.*

In 1845 Charlotte found some of the poetry that Emily had been writing and eventually persuaded her sister to attempt to publish her work. Charlotte and Emily, along with their sister Anne, eventually published a collection of poems under the male names of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell. Each pseudonym begins with the same consonant as the writer's name. The sisters paid to have the collection published, and even though it only sold two copies, they were undaunted and continued to write. This time each sister wrote a novel.

Evidence suggests that Emily Brontë began writing *Wuthering Heights* in December 1845 and completed it the next year. A year after that, in July of 1847, *Wuthering Heights* was accepted for publication; however, it was not printed until December, following the success of *Jane Eyre.*

Although *Wuthering Heights* did not meet with the critical success *Jane Eyre* received, contemporary critics tend to consider Emily the best writer of the Brontë sisters. Emily Brontë's highly imaginative novel of passion and hate was too savage and animal-like and clumsy in its own day and time, but contemporary audiences consider it mild.

The fall following publication, Emily Brontë left home to attend her brother's funeral. She caught a severe cold that spread to her lungs, and she died of tuberculosis on December 19, 1848.

Following the publication of poems, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and Anne's novel *Agnes Grey*, audiences considered all three "Bells" to be one author. Confusion continued as Anne published *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. *Wuthering Heights* was reissued with poems and a biographical notice by Charlotte. By this time, both Emily and Anne had died, and Charlotte succinctly stated how and why she and her sisters assumed the name of Bell. Charlotte Brontë also provided insight into the life of her sister.

Long after its initial publication and subsequent death of its author, *Wuthering Heights* has become one of the classics of English literature. After the reissue of Emily Brontë's text, the editors of the *Examiner* commented upon Charlotte's introduction. Their words and sentiments are often echoed by admirers of *Wuthering Heights*: "We have only most unfeignedly to deplore the blight which fell prematurely on sure rich intellectual promise, and to regret that natures so rare and noble should so early have passed away."

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INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL

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The following Introduction section is provided solely as an educational tool and is not meant to replace the experience of your reading the novel. Read the Introduction and A Brief Synopsis to enhance your understanding of the novel and to prepare yourself for the critical thinking that should take place whenever you read any work of fiction or nonfiction. Keep the List of Characters and Character Map at hand so that as you read the original literary work, if you encounter a character about whom you're uncertain, you can refer to the List of Characters and Character Map to refresh your memory.

Introduction

Although *Wuthering Heights* received neither critical praise nor any local popularity during its initial publication, the reading public has changed substantially since 1847, and now both critical and popular opinion praise Emily Brontë's singular work of fiction. Victorian society would not accept the violent characters and harsh realities of *Wuthering Heights*, but subsequent audiences are both more understanding and accepting of the use of unsavory aspects of human life in literature.

The first person to praise publicly *Wuthering Heights* was Charlotte Brontë, Emily's sister, who wrote a preface and introduction for the second publication of the novel in 1850 and became the novel's first and foremost critic. Yet Charlotte herself was not entirely convinced of all its merits. Commenting upon the advisability of creating characters such as Heathcliff, Charlotte states, "I scarcely think it is [advisable]." Charlotte's comments may be a direct concession and appeal to Victorian audiences to accept and respect *Wuthering Heights* without having to accept completely everything within the text. In addition to having difficulty with the content, the Victorian audience's view of women could not allow anyone of that period to accept that *Wuthering Heights* was the creation of a female (it had been published originally under the pseudonym Ellis Bell). After its initial publication, both critical and popular audiences ended up embracing *Wuthering Heights*, and it remains one of the classic works still read and studied.

Wuthering Heights is an important contemporary novel for two reasons: Its honest and accurate portrayal of life during an early era provides a glimpse of history, and the literary merit it possesses in and of itself enables the text to rise above entertainment and rank as quality literature. The portrayal of women, society, and class bear witness to a time that's foreign to contemporary readers. But even though society is different today than it was two centuries ago, people remain the same, and contemporary readers can still relate to the feelings and emotions of the central characters—Heathcliff and Catherine—as well as those of the supporting characters. Because Brontë's characters are real, they are human subjects with human emotions; therefore, *Wuthering Heights* is not just a sentimental romance novel. It is a presentation of life, an essay on love, and a glimpse at relationships. Many critics, praising Brontë's style, imagery, and word choice, contend that *Wuthering Heights* is actually poetry masquerading as prose.

This lyrical prose has a distinct structure and style. Significantly, *Wuthering Heights* is about ordered pairs: two households, two generations, and two pairs of children. Some critics dismiss the plot of the second-generation characters as being a simple retelling of the first story; however, in doing so, they are dismissing the entire second half of the book. Each of the two main story lines of the two generations comprises 17 chapters. Clearly, in order to appreciate fully *Wuthering Heights*, attention must be paid to the second half, particularly noting that the second half is not just a retelling but rather a revising—a form of renewal and rebirth.

These ordered pairs more often than not, are pairs of contrast. The most noticeable pair is that of the two houses: Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. Wuthering Heights has the wild, windy moors and its inhabitants possess the same characteristics. Opposite this are the calm, orderly parks of Thrushcross Grange and its inhabitants. Each household has a male and female with a counterpart at the other. Readers gain insight into these characters not only by observing what they think, say, and do but also by comparing them to their counterparts, noticing how they do not think, speak, and act. Much is learned by recognizing what one is not.

Structurally, the narrative is also primarily told from a paired point of view. Lockwood frames the initial story, telling the beginning and ending chapters (with minor comments within). Within the framework of his story, Nelly relates the majority of the action from her outsider's point of view. In essence, readers are eavesdropping rather than experiencing the action. And embedded within Nelly's narrative are chapters told primarily from another character's point of view that has been related to Nelly. This technique allows readers to experience more than would with any one narrator, enabling readers to gain an insider's perspective.

The role of the outsider should not be overlooked because the setting of *Wuthering Heights* is one of complete isolation; therefore, only those with first- or second-hand experiences are able to relate them to others. The moors connecting Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange serve a dual purpose—linking the two households while simultaneously separating them from the village and all others.

This isolated setting is important for Brontë's combination of realism and gothic symbolism. Brontë took conventions of the time and instead of merely recreating them in a work of her own, used them as a springboard to write an entirely original tale, creating characters who are simultaneously real and symbolic archetypes.

Brontë uses these characters to explore themes of good versus evil, crime and punishment, passion versus rationality, revenge, selfishness, division and reconciliation, chaos and order, nature and culture, health and sickness, rebellion, and the nature of love. These themes are not independent of each other; rather, they mix, mingle, and intertwine as the story unfolds.

Wuthering Heights is also a social novel about class structure in society as well as a treatise on the role of women. Brontë illustrates how class mobility is not always moving in one direction. For Catherine, representing a lower class, social class plays a major role when deciding to get married. That is why she cannot marry Heathcliff and agrees, instead, to marry Edgar. For Isabella, however, just the opposite is true. She is drawn to the wild, mysterious man, regardless of the fact that he is beneath her social standing. Because of her infatuation, she loses everything that is dear to her. Readers must therefore look not only to social class when judging and analyzing characters; they must determine what decisions are made by members of a certain class and why these characters made the decisions they did.

On the surface, *Wuthering Heights* is a love story. Delving deeper, readers find both a symbolic and psychological novel. (Contemporary audiences, for example, easily relate to issues of child abuse and alcoholism.) In fact, *Wuthering Heights* cannot be easily classified as any particular type of novel—that is the literary strength that Brontë's text possesses. The novel told from multiple points of view is easily read and interpreted from multiple perspectives, also.

Like other literary masterpieces, *Wuthering Heights* has spawned dramatic productions, a musical retelling, movies, and even a novel that fills in the gaps of Heathcliff's three missing years. Emily Brontë's novel has overcome its initial chilly reception to warm the hearts of romantics and realists worldwide.

A Brief Synopsis

Wuthering Heights opens with Lockwood, a tenant of Heathcliff's, visiting the home of his landlord. A subsequent visit to Wuthering Heights yields an accident and a curious supernatural encounter, which pique Lockwood's curiosity. Back at Thrushcross Grange and recuperating from his illness, Lockwood begs Nelly Dean, a servant who grew up in Wuthering Heights and now cares for Thrushcross Grange, to tell him of the history of Heathcliff. Nelly narrates the main plot line of *Wuthering Heights*.

Mr. Earnshaw, a Yorkshire Farmer and owner of Wuthering Heights, brings home an orphan from Liverpool. The boy is named Heathcliff and is raised with the Earnshaw children, Hindley and Catherine. Catherine loves Heathcliff but Hindley hates him because Heathcliff has replaced Hindley in Mr. Earnshaw's affection. After Mr. Earnshaw's death, Hindley does what he can to destroy Heathcliff, but Catherine and Heathcliff grow up playing wildly on the moors, oblivious of anything or anyone else—until they encounter the Lintons.

Edgar and Isabella Linton live at Thrushcross Grange and are the complete opposites of Heathcliff and Catherine. The Lintons welcome Catherine into their home but shun Heathcliff. Treated as an outsider once again, Heathcliff begins to think about revenge. Catherine, at first, splits her time between Heathcliff and Edgar, but soon she spends more time with Edgar, which makes Heathcliff jealous. When Heathcliff overhears Catherine tell Nelly that she can never marry him (Heathcliff), he leaves Wuthering Heights and is gone for three years.

While he is gone, Catherine continues to court and ends up marrying Edgar. Their happiness is short-lived because they are from two different worlds, and their relationship is strained further when Heathcliff returns. Relationships are complicated even more as Heathcliff winds up living with his enemy, Hindley (and Hindley's son, Hareton), at Wuthering Heights and marries Isabella, Edgar's sister. Soon after Heathcliff's marriage, Catherine gives birth to Edgar's daughter, Cathy, and dies.

Heathcliff vows revenge and does not care who he hurts while executing it. He desires to gain control of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange and to destroy everything Edgar Linton holds dear. In order to exact his revenge, Heathcliff must wait 17 years. Finally, he forces Cathy to marry his son, Linton. By this time he has control of the Heights and with Edgar's death, he has control of the Grange.

Through all of this, though, the ghost of Catherine haunts Heathcliff. What he truly desires more than anything else is to be reunited with his soul mate. At the end of the novel, Heathcliff and Catherine are united in death, and Hareton and Cathy are going to be united in marriage.

List of Characters

Heathcliff The main character. Orphaned as a child, he is constantly on the outside, constantly losing people. Although he and Catherine Earnshaw profess that they complete each other, her decision to marry Edgar Linton almost destroys their relationship. He spends most of his life contemplating and acting out revenge. He is abusive, brutal, and cruel.

Catherine Earnshaw The love of Heathcliff's life. Wild, impetuous, and arrogant as a child, she grows up getting everything she wants. When two men fall in love with her, she torments both of them. Ultimately, Catherine's selfishness ends up hurting everyone she loves, including herself.

Edgar Linton Catherine's husband and Heathcliff's rival. Well-mannered and well-to-do, he falls in love with and marries Catherine. His love for her enables him to overlook their incompatible natures.

Cathy Linton Daughter of Catherine and Edgar. A mild form of her mother, she serves as a reminder of her mother's strengths and weaknesses. (Note: For the purpose of clarity, the younger Catherine is referred to as "Cathy" in this Note, and her mother is referred to as "Catherine." This convention is not used in the original text.)

Linton Heathcliff Son of Heathcliff and Isabella. Weak and whiny (both physically and emotionally), he serves as a pawn in Heathcliff's game of revenge. He marries Cathy.

Hareton Earnshaw Catherine's nephew, son of Hindley. Although uneducated and unrefined, Hareton has a staunch sense of pride. He is attracted to Cathy but put off by her attitude. His generous heart enables the two of them to eventually fall in love and marry. Hareton is the only person to mourn Heathcliff's death.

Ellen (Nelly) Dean The primary narrator and Catherine's servant. Although she is one person capable of relating the majority of the events that occurred, she is not without bias.

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