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# EMILY BRONTË

## WUTHERING HEIGHTS



*Emily Brontë*

WUTHERING HEIGHTS

EDITED BY  
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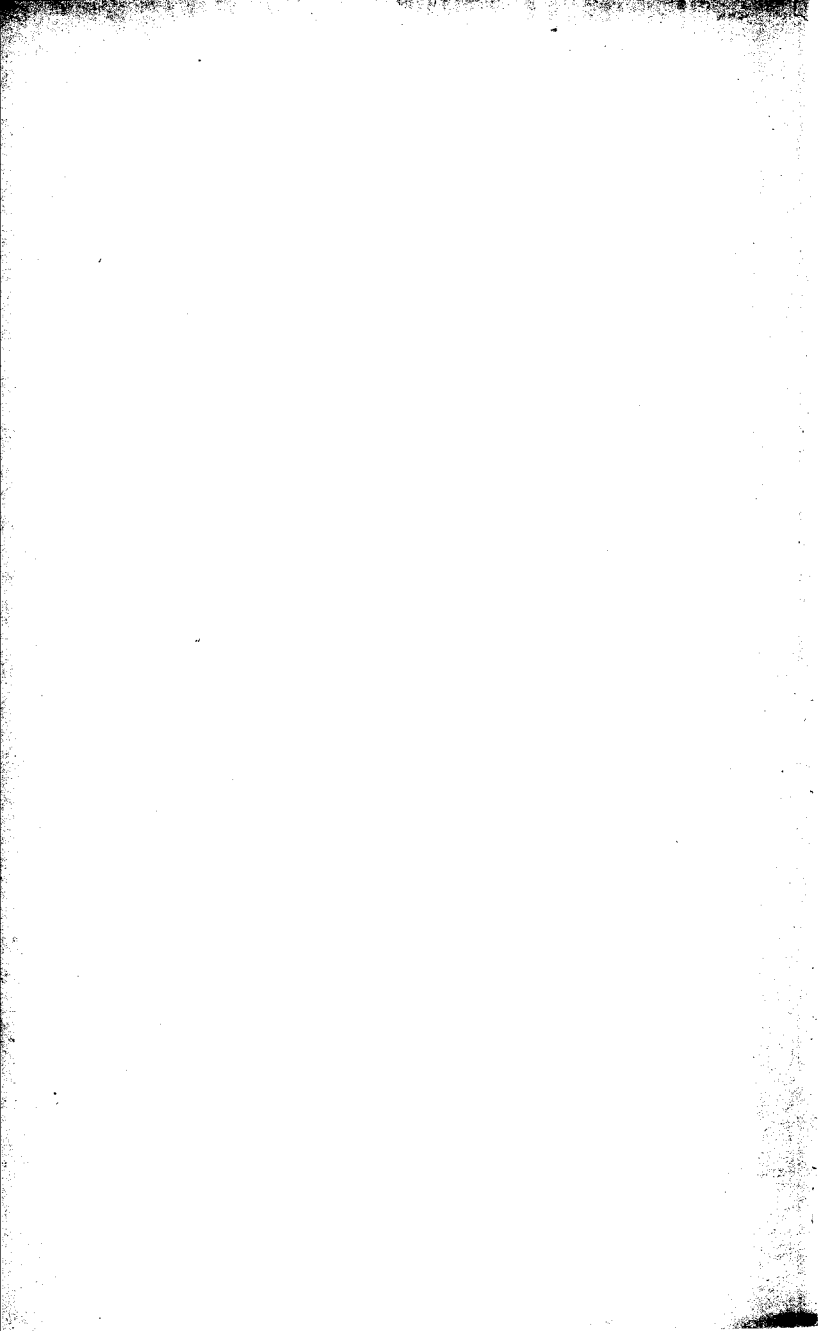
WUTHERING HEIGHTS

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## *Introduction*

**WUTHERING HEIGHTS** is the only novel of Emily Brontë, who died of tuberculosis in 1848 at the age of thirty. The story of her life, like that of her brother and sisters, has long since taken its place among the great literary legends of Britain and possesses an almost mythic quality. The originality and intensity of her imagination, which led her to produce a novel unique in English literature, provide a fascinating subject for critical inquiry and psychological speculation. She was the daughter of an Irish clergyman whose background was Methodist but who was himself firmly of the Church of England. In 1820 he became perpetual curate of Haworth, Yorkshire, and thus for his children home became a somewhat bleak northern parsonage on the edge of the moors. Emily was his fifth child. The two eldest had died in early childhood; the third was Charlotte, the only one of the Brontës to become a successful writer in her own lifetime (though even she, by far the longest lived of all her generation of Brontës, only lived to the age of thirty-nine); the fourth was Patrick Branwell, the only son, who ruined his early promise and drank and gloomed himself into an early grave; the youngest was Anne, the least original of the girls but also a novelist, who lived to be twenty-nine. Their mother died in 1821, leaving the infant family to the care of her sister, Elizabeth Branwell, who came up from Penzance to spend the rest of her life looking after the Brontë household. Her background, too, was Methodist, though Methodism in Cornwall tended to be less emotionally violent than it could be in Yorkshire, where William Grimshaw (a previous incumbent of Haworth) had carried Wesley's message to the north of England with enormous histrionic force. Stories of Grimshaw's dramatic dealings with sinners were well remembered and often repeated in Haworth; Tabitha Ackroyd, the local woman who gave faithful domestic service to the Brontës for many years, knew them and doubtless retailed them to the children.



The Reverend Patrick Brontë\* did not lead a social life, and the Brontë children kept very much to themselves and had to depend entirely on their own resources. They walked on the moors, of course, and Emily in particular developed a passionate love of the rough moorland scenery; at home, when they were not engaged in domestic duties, they read whatever they could lay their hands on (including Æsop, Bunyan, Scott, Byron, Shakespeare, Ossian, the *Arabian Nights*, *Blackwood's Magazine*, the *Leeds Intelligencer*, the *Leeds Mercury*, *John Bull*) and lived more and more in the world of imagination. Aunt Branwell, with her Methodist hymns and what Charlotte later called her 'mad Methodist magazines, full of miracles and apparitions and preternatural warnings, ominous dreams and frenzied fanaticisms', unconsciously provided important fodder for their imagination, while their father, with his tales of Wesley in Ireland and other stories of his Irish youth and his fierce conservatism fiercely expressed, added his share; further material came from the tales of Luddite riots and other kinds of violence to be picked up in Haworth and its vicinity, and from local superstitions and stories of wrestlings with the devil and other kinds of religious melodrama connected with the activities of such stalwart Methodists as William Grimshaw and Jabez Bunting.

Emily had brief excursions to school and to a private house as children's governess, but she could never bear to live long away from Haworth and her beloved moors; for the great part of her life she stayed at home. But her imagination roamed far. All the Brontë children were involved from fairly early childhood in writing the chronicles of imaginary countries in elaborate detail and with remarkable gusto. Mr Brontë's return from Leeds with a box of wooden soldiers for Branwell on 5 June 1826 first released this extraordinary imaginative energy. Each child chose a soldier and determined his name and character, and these characters became actors in a series of games which grew steadily more elaborate as more characters were invented and the actions in which they were involved grew into complicated serial stories. Written

\* The family name was 'Brunty' in Ireland, probably originally 'O'Prunty'. Patrick Brontë changed his surname to 'Brontë' soon after Nelson, whom he greatly admired, was made Duke of Bronte in 1799.

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out meticulously in a neat and tiny hand, the stories form an extraordinary collection of miniature home-made manuscript books. The surviving Brontë *juvenilia* have been carefully examined by Fannie E. Ratchford and discussed by her in her book *The Brontës' Web of Childhood*.<sup>\*</sup> (The title of the book comes from Charlotte's poetic account of these literary activities, 'We wove a web in childhood'.) Her conclusion is that the little booklets 'are a closely connected series of stories, poems, novels, histories, and dramas having a common setting and common characters, written through the sixteen years between 1829 and 1845, . . . They are the epic cycle of an imaginary world in which the four young Brontës lived, moved, and had their being, into which they projected themselves and all that they knew of life from narrow experience and wide reading.' The surviving work is mostly Charlotte's; she and Branwell developed their cycle of Angria, while the stories of Gondal, which were developed independently by Emily and Anne, have not survived. All that we have to indicate the nature of the Gondal cycle are poems by Emily and Anne spoken by Gondalian characters at critical moments in their history and a very few prose fragments referring to the progress of the stories or identifying a place or a character.

On 24 November 1834, when she was sixteen years old, Emily captured the actual moment of life at Haworth parsonage by setting down the following on paper:

Toby said just now Come Anne pilloputate [peel a potato] Aunt has come into the kitchen just now and said Where are your feet Anne Anne answered On the floor Aunt. Papa opened the parlour door and gave Branwell a letter saying Here Branwell read this and show it to your Aunt and Charlotte. The Gondals are discovering the interior of Gaaldine. Sally Mosely is washing in the back kitchen.

'The Gondals are discovering the interior of Gaaldine.' The completely matter-of-fact way in which this remark about the progress of the Gondal epic is inserted into the account of ordinary household affairs indicates the degree to which the events of this imaginary world were taken for granted by Emily as an integral part of the world she lived in. Gaaldine, as other clues

<sup>\*</sup> New York, 1941.

indicate, was conquered and colonized from Gondal. Anne added in pencil to the list of proper names at the end of the family's copy of Goldsmith's *A Grammar of General Geography* a list of Gondalian place-names which provide some important clues for the reconstruction of the stories. 'Gaaldine, a large Island newly discovered in the South Pacific' comes immediately before 'Gondal, a large Island in the North Pacific'. We know from the poems that Gondal had a climate and landscape like that of Yorkshire, while Gaaldine had a landscape of tropical luxuriance.

The most impressive and passionate of Emily's poems are Gondal poems, and even though they obviously reflect her own deepest emotional needs they are on the surface dramatic utterances by invented characters. Some of these characters, and some of the situations in which they find themselves, remind us vividly of characters and situations in *Wuthering Heights*. There are also characters and situations from the stories of great preachers and great sinners that Emily learned from the 'mad Methodist magazines' and from oral tradition in Haworth that have interesting parallels in the novel. (For example, the riot which attended the preaching of Jabez Bunting at the opening of the school chapel at Woodhouse Grove, the school for sons of Methodist clergy, is similar in several points to Lockwood's dreams of Jabes Branderham's sermon and its aftermath in Chapter 3 of *Wuthering Heights*.) Emily Brontë's strange and powerful novel thus sprang from a lonely but well-stocked imagination.

When we consider the parallel existence at Haworth Parsonage of secret fantastic imaginings and household routine, we may be less surprised to find that perhaps the most striking thing about *Wuthering Heights* is its combination of matter-of-fact precision in the telling and monstrous symbolic conflicts in the actual story. Though the foppish and idle curiosity of Lockwood and the practical common sense of Nelly Dean (the principal narrator) do provide a means of setting the passionate extravagance of the action against the normal expectations of more conventional people, there is nevertheless a lack of surprise at her own story in Emily Brontë's manner, a sense of habituation, as though the manic emotions of Heathcliff and the elder Catherine were part of a world of feeling she took quietly for granted. It is to

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what might be called the sublime deadpan of the telling that the extraordinary force of the novel can largely be attributed. In spite of Nelly's constant refrain of 'hush' as she endeavours to soothe Catherine or placate Heathcliff, she shows no sense of the *real* oddness of these goings-on; girls are naughty and men can be violent or brutal, and in each case reproaches are called for, but at no point does Nelly throw up her hands and exclaim: 'for God's sake, what is going on here? What kind of people *are* they?' She goes about her daily business – that daily business that plays a larger part in the novel than critics have noted.

The sense of domestic routine is strong. In the very first chapter we are given an account of the 'ranks of immense pewter dishes, interspersed with silver jugs and tankards, towering row after row, in a vast oak dresser, to the very roof', and indeed this introductory picture of the 'family sitting-room' at Wuthering Heights is notable for the sense it provides of being at the centre of a genuine domestic economy. When Lockwood returns shortly afterwards on his second visit, we are shown again 'the huge, warm, cheerful apartment' which 'glowed delightfully in the radiance of an immense fire'. The effect here is not simply to contrast the warm interior with the cold rough weather outside; there is a genuine hearth at Wuthering Heights – as there is not at Thrushcross Grange during the period when it is let to Lockwood. In fact, what drives Lockwood to Wuthering Heights – a four-mile walk over the moors on a cold January day – is the fact that the fire in his room is out. ' . . . stepping into the room, I saw a servant girl on her knees, surrounded by brushes and coal-scuttles, and raising an infernal dust as she extinguished the flames with heaps of cinders.' At Thrushcross Grange the fire was deliberately put out; on his arrival at Wuthering Heights Lockwood found 'the radiance of an immense fire'. And even after his terrifying night there, he comes first thing in the morning upon 'Zillah urging flakes of flame up the chimney with a colossal bellows, and Mrs Heathcliff, kneeling on the hearth, reading a book by the aid of the blaze'. The fire is already giving out a 'furnace-heat'. And during the night, when Lockwood had descended into the back-kitchen to rekindle his candle, he had found 'a gleam of fire, raked compactly together'.

Food and fire are mentioned often. Heathcliff's death comes about at last because he refuses to eat, and we are shown the specific scenes where his food is set on the table and he does not touch it. When Isabella arrives at the Heights as Heathcliff's wife, she finds Joseph bending over the fire making porridge. It is true that she is aware of the neglect in the house since she last visited it, but still 'there was a great fire' and a domestic routine of warming and feeding, however coarsely, is going on. The difference between Linton and the other inhabitants of Wuthering Heights is projected concretely through his difference of diet; he cannot eat the porridge provided and has to be given 'boiled milk or tea'. And when young Catherine is imprisoned at the Heights so that she can be forced to marry Linton, Hareton brings her something to eat on a tray.

All this concrete domestic detail in the novel helps to steady it, as it were. Here is a world that the author has lived in and carefully observed. The fire, the hearth, the dishes, the porridge, are a guarantee of authenticity. The action of the novel may in some respects be appropriate to remote Gothic castles where the characters feed – if they feed at all – on exotic or purely literary food; but the setting is solid Yorkshire. At the same time we are aware of a symbolic quality in many of the domestic details. Clearly, the difference between the deliberately smothered fire at Thrushcross Grange and the roaring fire at Wuthering Heights, or between the diet of Hareton and of Edgar, is part of the total pattern of meaning achieved by the novel. Clearly, too, the sense of people, in spite of everything, *living well* at Wuthering Heights – Ellen making the Christmas cake in Chapter 7, 'making the house and kitchen cheerful with great fires', to take only one example – has something to do with the novel's emotional centre. In fact, throughout the novel the homely and familiar and the wild and extravagant go together, the former providing a setting for the latter, with the result that the simplest domestic detail can, in virtue of being made the scene of such monstrous conflicts of passion, become symbolic. Conversely, passion set in such scenes becomes credible.

Though the symbolic elements in the story almost thrust themselves on the reader's perception, the symbolism is complex and

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not as simply organized as might at first be supposed. We have noted a contrast between the fireless grate at Thrushcross Grange and the roaring fires of Wuthering Heights; but even more noticeable in the book is the contrast between the luxury and comfort of Thrushcross Grange, lying in the soft valley below, and the fierce unpadded existence at the Heights, which lie exposed to the winds on high moorland. When in Chapter 6 Catherine and Heathcliff escape from Hindley's tyranny at home to wander over the moors, their attention is caught by 'a glimpse of the Grange lights' and they decide to 'just go and see whether the Lintons passed their Sunday evenings standing shivering in corners, while their father and mother sat eating and drinking and singing and laughing, and burning their eyes out before the fire'. The vision which the two children see through the windows of Thrushcross Grange is a vision of light and luxury:

We crept through a broken hedge, groped our way up the path, and planted ourselves on a flower-pot under the drawing-room window. The light came from thence; they had not put up the shutters, and the curtains were only half closed. Both of us were able to look in by standing on the basement, and clinging to the ledge, and we saw - ah! it was beautiful - a splendid place carpeted with crimson, and crimson-covered chairs and tables, and a pure white ceiling bordered by gold, a shower of glass-drops hanging in silver chains from the centre, and shimmering with little soft tapers.

It is this vision of a soft luxury at Thrushcross Grange which provides the starting point for that view of the novel which sees it essentially as a carefully patterned weaving of multiple contrasts between storm and calm, represented respectively by life at the Heights and life at the Grange. This is the view persuasively argued by Lord David Cecil in Chapter 5 of his *Early Victorian Novelists*.<sup>\*</sup> Lord David carefully divides the principal characters in the story into children of calm and children of storm and their offspring, who are various crosses between the two; offspring of love combine the best qualities of the parents and offspring of hate (e.g. Linton Heathcliff) combine the worst. Children of storm

<sup>\*</sup> Pelican Books, 1948.

mis-mated to children of calm or frustrated in their desire to mate with fellow children of storm are driven to destructive madness; but children of such mis-matings if those mis-matings were made in love and not in hate (e.g. Catherine and Edgar, Hindley and Frances) can themselves mate and restore harmony between opposing elements. Such harmony is restored by the marriage of the younger Catherine with Hareton at the end of the novel.

This is both neat and ingenious, but it leaves out too much and does not adequately account either for the novel's power or for the symbolic elements that operate in it. Why should the fatuous Lockwood be visited by the ghost of the dead Catherine and why should he give way to a sadistic impulse to rub the child's wrist across the broken glass of the window pane (the cruellest of many cruel images in the book)? What is the meaning of the recurring sadism in the story? What, if any, kind of morality is involved? What is the imagination really doing in this disturbingly violent tale?

Dorothy Van Ghent, in a most interesting essay on the novel\*, sees it as the symbolic presentation of the duality of human and non-human existence, of the 'otherness' of the natural as opposed to the human. She sees in the violent figures of Catherine and Heathcliff 'portions of the flux of nature, children of rock and heath and tempest, striving to identify themselves as human, but disrupting all around them with their monstrous appetite for an inhuman kind of intercourse, and finally disintegrated from within by the very eagerness out of which they are made'. Against 'the wilderness of inhuman unreality' she sets the 'quietly secular, voluntarily limited, safely human concourse of Nelly Dean and Lockwood'. Mark Schorer takes a more simply didactic view of the novel.† '*Wuthering Heights*, as I understand it, means to be a work of edification: Emily Brontë begins by wishing to instruct her narrator, the dandy, Lockwood, in the nature of a grand passion; she ends by instructing herself in the vanity of human wishes'. This seems a curiously simple moral to emerge from such

\* In *The English Novel: Form and Function*, Harper Torchbooks, 1961.

† *Fiction and the 'Analogical Matrix'*, reprinted in *Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction 1920-51*, selected by John W. Aldridge, New York, 1952.

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a disturbingly complex novel, and while it may well represent in some degree part of Emily Brontë's conscious intention in writing the book it hardly accounts for all that is actually there. Nevertheless, in arguing for this view Mr Schorer makes some most illuminating comments on the language of the novel, seeing the metaphors as signifying 'the impermanence of self and the permanence of something larger' and drawing attention to the way in which 'Emily Brontë roots her analogies in the fierce life of animals and in the relentless life of the elements – fire, wind, water'.

How are we to decide between these different interpretations? The fact that such differences of interpretation are possible is of course a tribute to the novel's richness and fascination, and also to the fact that there must have been powerful forces working in Emily Brontë while she was writing it of which she herself cannot have been fully conscious. We might profitably begin, however, with the evidence of careful conscious design. The extraordinary meticulousness of the novel's time-structure was first pointed out in an essay by C. P. Sanger.\* It is possible to work out the date of every significant event in the story, including the dates of nearly everybody's birth, marriage, and death, even though such dates are rarely given explicitly. If one follows all the clues carefully, one gets an interestingly symmetrical genealogical table like the one on the following page.

There are a son and a daughter at Wuthering Heights (Hindley and Catherine) and a son and a daughter at Thrushcross Grange (Edgar and Isabella). Heathcliff is the intrusive element in both families. Brought to Wuthering Heights in the summer of 1771 (when Catherine was barely six years old and Hindley barely fourteen), this mysterious foundling ousts Hindley in the affections of his father and soon shows a passionate natural kinship with Catherine. Catherine's marriage to Edgar Linton in April 1783 – Heathcliff had left Wuthering Heights in 1780 and remains in the unknown until after the marriage – represents the climax of the association of the Heights and the Grange which had begun in November 1777, when Catherine and Heathcliff visited the Grange in the scene from which quotation has already been made.

\* *The Structure of Wuthering Heights*, Hogarth Essays, 1926.



