Emily Brontë
WUTHERING HEIGHTS

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Notes on English Literature

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GENERAL NOTE

This series of introductions to the great classics of English literature is designed primarily for the school, college, and university student, although it is hoped that they will be found helpful by a much larger audience. Three aims have been kept in mind:

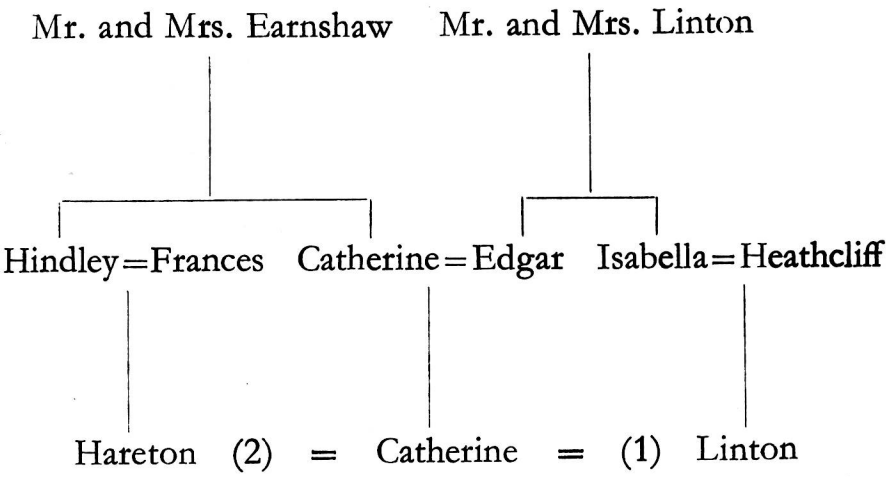
(A) To give the reader the relevant information necessary for his fuller understanding of the work.

(B) To indicate the main areas of critical interest, to suggest suitable critical approaches, and to point out possible critical difficulties.

(C) To do this in as simple and lucid a manner as possible, avoiding technical jargon and giving a full explanation of any critical terms employed.

Each introduction contains questions on the text and suggestions for further reading. It should be emphasized that in no sense is any introduction to be considered as a substitute for the reader's own study, understanding, and appreciation of the work.

THE FAMILY TREE



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Some of the questions which I want to raise in this book are general questions which could be applied to almost any novel or story. We might well begin by asking what it is that makes us listen to a story? What holds our attention and arouses our curiosity? The stuff of fiction, I suggest, is adventure. The story may be one of physical adventures or of the inner adventures of feeling and imagination. If the story is to involve our sympathies and thoughts and judgements it will almost certainly go beyond physical adventure and indeed many novels written after the end of the nineteeth century dispense with physical adventures altogether. *Wuthering Heights* is one of the most remarkable inner adventure stories written in English, but it most emphatically gives us physical adventures too. The exciting situations of violence, mystery, and tension, which may be described as belonging to the action, are not separable from the excitements of feelings and judgment. Outer and inner adventure go together, interacting symbolically and literally.

Let me give some instances of these outer adventures, of the kind which might be found in a thriller. A man is snowbound and spends the night in an unused room in a lonely house on the moors. A father brings a wild little foundling into his family. His real son and his adopted son grow up in jealousy and hatred. A girl is torn between two loves and virtually wills her own death. The man who is closest

to her but whom she does not marry plans and carries out an elaborate and ruthless revenge. He is haunted by the ghost of his dead love and there is some subtle suggestion that the haunting is not confined to him. The daughter of the first girl is one of the victims of his revenge and is kidnapped and forcibly married to his son. There is a happy ending, with the frustration and death of revenger and a harmonious marriage. All these outlined situations suggest the excitements of what I mean by physical adventure. Their action is violent, filled with conflict and mystery. But those of you who already know the novel will agree that even such a bare outline can be seen to imply the conflict and mystery of inner adventures too.

How can a woman be torn between two loves, and with what kind of consequence? What makes a man attempt to degrade another human being? What does it feel like to have nothing but hatred for nearly everyone but a dead woman? These are questions about motivation and action, and the questions and their answers are raised by the characters and their relationships. But the novel is also an adventure for the reader, in a very real sense, forcing him to sift evidence and make difficult judgements. Can we feel anything but distaste and disapproval for ruthless love and revenge? Is Heathcliff a villain or a hero or does he force us to lay aside the usual categories? Is it possible to recognise the happy ending as a harmony but one which lacks something of the passion of earlier discord? Emily Brontë, unlike many great novelists, forces us to give our own answers to such questions of judgment, not merely to assent to her

verdict, and in the outer adventures of action, and the inner adventures of characters and reader, she creates a tension which is powerful and rare.

It is not enough to ask about the way in which we respond to the story. As soon as we begin to ask questions about situations and characters, about the problems and excitements they raise, and about the resemblance of their world to our own, we become involved in looking at the novel as a work of art. How is the story organised? Where do we begin and where do we end? And with what effect? From what point of view do we observe these inner and outer adventures? Do the characters act and speak, as in drama, without the explanations and expositions of an author speaking to the reader, or are they presented in the context of the author's moral and psychological commentary, direct or disguised? Who tells the story?

The novel presents us with an exciting experience, tells us a story which holds our interest, and is an artificially constructed work of art. It may also be—and almost always is—an expression of the author's values and beliefs, an illustration or a debate expressed through character and action. I have already said that part of the excitement of this novel comes from its posing of difficult questions. Seeing this makes us do more than examine the lifelike qualities of the characters and actions. It makes us ask whether the characters do more than simply embody vices and virtues. In a novel by Dickens, for instance, it is usually pretty clear that the characters represent certain clear-cut qualities. In *Dombey and Son* we can see that Florence and Paul and Solomon Gills represent the

values of love and affection, the values of the heart. Other characters, like Dombey himself until he learns better from experience, demonstrate the opposite values of selfishness and mercenariness. In very many novels there is some kind of division between the sheep and the goats, and usually showing the interesting possibilities of the transformation of goats into sheep. This is true not only of the simplified characters of Dickens but of the more complex psychological creations of George Eliot, where the characters are often less clearly labelled but still express values, where relations and actions and destinies form an argument or a criticism, moral and social. Is there this kind of moral pattern in *Wuthering Heights*? Can we say that Heathcliff and the first Catherine are to be condemned outright, as we can of Pecksniff and Jonas Chuzzlewit? Can we say that Hareton and the second Catherine are to be admired as wholeheartedly as, say, Adam Bede?

I am admittedly making rather crude generalisations about Dickens and George Eliot, which would need modification and more explanation in another context. I do think that it is possible to make some kind of moral generalisation about their characters which many critics have found impossible to make about the characters of *Wuthering Heights*. I believe that it is inappropriate to ask the conventional questions about the moral theme of this novel, just as it is also inappropriate to ask questions about its social relevance, though both these sets of closely related questions usually cry out to be asked when the critic is discussing Victorian novels of this period.

The absence of conventional moral definition and social criticism are not the only differences to be found between *Wuthering Heights* and contemporary novels by Dickens and Thackeray, and (a decade later) George Eliot. *Wuthering Heights* is unusual, though not unique, in its poetic intensity. It is more like *Moby Dick* or *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, in its use of natural symbolism and its powerful lyrical expression, than it is like any novel by Dickens or George Eliot. But it is not a purely poetic novel, but one which has a wide range including not only the hysterical poetry of the two Catherines and the symbolic landscape of the moors and weather, but the solid realism of Nelly Dean and old Joseph.

Lastly, we may ask certain questions about the author and her experiences. We shall not only remember the parsonage at Haworth and the restricted lonely life of Emily who found even the everyday contacts with the villagers difficult, so Charlotte tells us, but the remarkable literary origins of the Brontë novels. The fantasy and even the feelings, the feuds and revenges, the lyrical outbursts, and the character of Heathcliff, can all be related to the fantasy world shared by the Brontë children, especially to the imaginary saga of Gondal which Emily and Anne continued to write about, in letters, diaries, stories, and poems, until their death. Charlotte and their brother Branwell, had collaborated with them in literary fantasy in their childhood, but eventually Emily and Anne broke off from the creation of Angria, and invented their own world of Gondal, traces of which remain chiefly in Emily's poems. The problem of the Gondal origins of

Wuthering Heights, particularly in relation to Heathcliff, is a very complicated one, and I have avoided detailed discussion and merely listed writings on this topic in the Reading List. But I have occasionally made some use of Emily's poems, which seem unquestionably to belong to the world of feeling and action which we find in the novel, and which provide some examples of the influence of Gondal.

Like other novels, *Wuthering Heights* is an absorbing story, a carefully organised work of art, an expression of the author's values, and a creation which can be tenatively related to the life and other writings of Emily Brontë. Although I have stressed these four aspects of the novel in this introduction, and have kept them in mind throughout this book, I have not divided my study under these headings. I have paid some attention to the excitements of the story, the artistic form, the moral problems, and certain external facts, while choosing to follow through three main topics which seem to direct our attention most profitably to the special interests and difficulties of *Wuthering Heights*: its storytellers; its apparently two-fold story of the two generations; and its combination of two worlds, the real everyday world and the suggested appearance of a supernatural world.

Section One

TWO STORYTELLERS

(i)

LOCKWOOD

One of the two most important differences between the medium of fiction and the medium of drama is fiction's inclusion of a storyteller. (The other equally important difference is the time-span.) Novels cannot do without a narrator's voice and point of view. The story may be frankly and unashamedly told in the author's voice, as it is in many Victorian novels. This voice may be very quiet and unobtrusive, as in Henry James and quite often in Dickens, or very conspicuously present, as in Thackeray and George Eliot. The author may speak very discreetly, directing our attention to characters and actions but not openly addressing us as readers, nor openly speaking of the characters as fictitious creations. The author may move outside the characters and speak about life in general, and you will find many excellent examples of this enlarging of the fictional world in Fielding and in George Eliot. The author may speak in an invented voice, using a mask (we sometimes call this the author's *persona*) and there are good examples of this in Chaucer's narrative poetry, which has much in common with later prose fiction, and in the early stories of George Eliot, where the author speaks as a man, taking her masculine pseudonym literally. The author may choose to speak

in the person of one of the characters, and in eighteenth and nineteenth century novels this is usually the person of the chief character, the hero (as in *Robinson Crusoe*, *David Copperfield*, or *Great Expectations*) or the heroine (as in *Moll Flanders* or *Jane Eyre*). But in some late Victorian novels, for instance in many novels by Conrad, the author can speak directly in the voice of a subordinate character, a spectator of the action, like Marlow in *Lord Jim* and other novels.

Emily Brontë choose to work through two storytellers, Mr. Lockwood and Nelly Dean, and I propose to consider them each in turn. It would be a mistake to talk about the story and the storytellers as though the reader were continually conscious of the voice and character telling the story. We hear the personal voice and see the scene and the characters through an individual pair of eyes at certain parts of the narrative, but neither Mr. Lockwood nor Nelly Dean remain conspicuously present throughout *all* the novel. Their story is interspersed with other people's stories: we read the first Catherine's diary and Isabella Linton tells of her experiences with Heathcliff in a long letter. Moreover, for much of the novel the story is played out dramatically, and we observe scenes and listen to dialogue almost as we do in a play, though never of course for very long. There are very few novels which are entirely narrated, without this recourse to dramatised action and dialogue. You may like to reflect on the importance of this 'dramatic' presentation.

We are less dependent upon the observations and viewpoint of Lockwood than upon those of Nelly Dean, for he is listener as well as storyteller. In fact,

Wuthering Heights is told as a story within a story. Lockwood's encounter with Heathcliff and Hareton Earnshaw and the second Catherine so arouses his curiosity that he asks Nelly, his housekeeper, to tell him their history. She brings him, and us, up-to-date. Then, after an interval, he comes back and sees the end of the story with his own eyes, with a little further narration from Nelly which fills the gap of his absence. He begins the story, and he also ends it. Both as storyteller and as listener, he is a character of some importance, endowed by the novelist with characteristics which make him a good medium for conveying certain essential effects.

He begins as a good representative of our ignorance, our interest, and our curiosity. He is the stranger in this rough, wild place, the townsman who tells us that he has come in search of seclusion and peace. He comes bringing with him certain superficial expectations and habits of polite society, and makes an ironical contrast with the characters and events which he describes. He is also the ordinary man in an extraordinary situation, and mirrors the mysteries and violence in his bewildered innocence.

Let us consider our first encounter with Lockwood at the very beginning of the novel. The first paragraph tells us that he has 'fixed on a situation . . . completely removed from the stir of society' and he speaks of this as a 'perfect misanthropist's heaven' and of himself and Heathcliff as 'a suitable pair to divide the desolation between us'. The next few pages make it very clear that Lockwood is in fact expecting some sociability, and that he is scarcely to be bracketed with Heathcliff,

though the full irony of the comparison does not strike us until much later in the novel. He speaks politely and Heathcliff replies rudely, and in his very interest in Heathcliff's morose reserve, we see that Lockwood's idea of seclusion, misanthropy, and reserve, are little more than the superficial and romantic affectations of a rather feeble and conventional man. Yet Lockwood is no fool: he speculates about his strange rude landlord, but reminds himself that he is 'running on too fast' and bestowing his 'own attributes over liberally on him'. His curiosity is aroused, and the novelist is able to use it, quite naturally, to describe the appearances of things and people in close detail. The detailed description of the strongly built house, with its slanting stunted firs and gaunt thorns, its jutting corner-stones, and its inscription over the door, is an important and compressed introduction to the perverted passions and mystery of Wuthering Heights, the appropriate dwelling-place of Heathcliff. These and other similar details, come into the story unobtrusively, as the puzzled and fascinated stranger explores the strange territory and its inhabitants with the fervour of a lonely tourist.

Lockwood tells us something about himself. His brief account of his failure in love, his inarticulate shyness and his icy retreat, shows that there is some point in his talk about reserve and misanthropy, and shows also his feeble shyness in strong contrast with the directness and fierceness of the passions of the Heights. Once more, the full irony of the contrasts and comparisons does not make itself felt immediately, but gradually. During his two first visits, in the first

two chapters, we see the moroseness and rudeness of Heathcliff and Catherine, hear the rough language of Heathcliff, Catherine and old Joseph, and observe the unsociability and the domestic tensions which arouse our curiosity as they do Lockwood's. There are one or two smaller details too. We see that Hareton, though 'entirely devoid of the superiority observable in Mr. and Mrs. Heathcliff', shows some signs of decent behaviour: it is he who asks Lockwood to sit down, and it is he who offers to guide him home through the snow. Catherine too, though ill-tempered and sulky, does at one point observe that 'a man's life is of more consequence than one evening's neglect of the horses'. There is already some indication that both she and Hareton have some humanity which distinguishes them from Heathcliff. We are primarily aware, however, not of these points, but of the hatred and tension which exists within this strange family, and which is exposed the more nakedly in contrast with the polite stranger's attempts at sociability, with his affable conversation, and with his pronounced interest in Catherine. Lockwood observes that he must beware of making Catherine regret her choice of Hareton, when his first misunderstanding about her relationship with Heathcliff gives place to his second misunderstanding about her relationship with Hareton. Though he carefully warns us against finding this reaction conceited, his explanation is carefully placed: 'My neighbour struck me as bordering on repulsive; I knew, through experience, that I was tolerably attractive.' When we read this for the second time, in the full knowledge of subsequent events, its irony is