

Notes for Viewing William Wyler's *Wuthering Heights*

This movie centers on the undying passion of Catherine and Heathcliff.

Motifs:

Visual motifs: storm, Penistone Crag and castle, heather, hands

Musical motif: Catherine and Heathcliff's theme

Visual characteristics:

Shots: Deep focus gives characters freedom of movement and reveals different relationships; it also gives the viewer the decision of what to focus on, as everything in the foreground, middle ground, and background are equally sharp.

Long takes emphasize ensemble acting and allow for action and reaction in the same shot (longer takes are more demanding on actors). Most shots of Catherine and Heathcliff are medium two-shots, which they dominate. They often stand close or touch with little or no background, which visually parallels their relationship as the focus of the movie and their lives.

Love scenes: Cinematographer Gregg Toland explained, "I tried to make the love scenes beautiful in a romantic way. It was a love story, a story of escape and fantasy. So I tried to keep it that way photographically, and let the audience dream through a whirl of beautiful close-ups."

Lighting: The light of *Wuthering Heights* during Mr. Earnshaw's lifetime contrasts with its darkness and shadows after his death; the gloomy, shadowy *Wuthering Heights* also contrasts with the light and airiness of Thrushcross Grange.

The frame: Characters are often grouped in a triangular arrangement of three people or are shot in a double-framed space, in a hallway, before windows, or between barriers (this framing creates a sense of confinement and suggests narrow choices).

Editing: Cuts and fades show the passage of time or lead into flashbacks. Are the time changes less confusing in the movie than in the film, i.e., does film have an advantage over the novel in jumping over time and space?

Costumes: The time period is not Regency (Jane Austen-style dress) but mid-Victorian, which Samuel Goldwyn preferred because the clothes are more elaborate and ostentatious.

Sounds:

Music parallels and reinforces the action and emotions. The wind repeats in the background, at times blending with the music.

Changes in character:

The characters are generally softened, less violent, and less complex. Both Cathy and Heathcliff are less tempestuous, more likable and understandable, more "normal." Hindley has no redeeming features; he refuses to share his room with Heathcliff and he demands that Heathcliff give up his horse. Lockwood does not slash the ghost-Cathy's wrist. Nelly is older, is reduced to a sympathetic observer and faithful servant who loves Cathy, and believes in ghosts. Catherine's ambition and aspirations for a life of wealth and luxury are emphasized (she urges Heathcliff to run away to make money and return for her). The self-centered, cantankerous, self-righteous Joseph fades into a faithful, concerned servant.

Changes in actions:

The whip and violin are delivered by Mr. Earnshaw. She does not want to see Heathcliff when he returns wealthy and Edgar encourages her to see him. Catherine seems jealous of Isabella; does she die of the marriage of Isabella and Heathcliff (though Dr. Kenneth refers to her fever and consumption)? Isabella pursues Heathcliff, both by stopping at *Wuthering Heights* with the "lame horse" excuse and at the ball.

Added scenes:

Cathy dresses for Edgar's visit; Heathcliff slaps her twice, then retreats to the stable, where he smashes the window with his hands. While Cathy is recovering from her illness after Heathcliff leaves, Edgar proposes in the garden; Isabella adds humor with her confusion over Cathy's medication and by running back into the house when she sees them romantically involved. Responding to Dr. Kenneth's announcement that Cathy is dying, Isabella asserts, "If she died, I might begin to live"; when Heathcliff rushes off to Cathy, she repeats three times, "let her die."

The two balls, with the large number of people and Cathy socializing as hostess at the second ball, integrates the characters into society; they are no longer the isolated, monolithic characters of Brontë's novel, which focuses on them almost exclusively. This integration contributes to the normalization of the characters and their relationships.

Opening Credits:

The background to the opening credits is a gloomy, ominous shadowed Wuthering Heights. Initially the music sounds dramatic, crashing, and threatening clap; it quickly shifts to the romantic Cathy and Heathcliff theme, heavy on the violins. Does the music also change to suggest the otherworldly?

Opening scene with Lockwood:

Dramatic, threatening music plays as Lockwood struggles toward Wuthering Heights in a snowstorm, thereby associating it with storm and suggesting the emotional storm within the house. The dogs attack him as he enters a house lit only by the flickering fireplace, which throws shadows. Shadow dominates as he is shown to his bedroom by Joseph's one candle. The camera dollies up to Lockwood in bed; then the camera takes a reverse-angle shot in close-up of Lockwood's horrified face from outside the window, suggesting Cathy's point of view. As the shutter flaps back and forth, Heathcliff and Cathy's theme plays. Nelly's tone is ominous before the dissolve to 40 years earlier. Nelly affirms the existence of Cathy as a ghost, "She calls him. He follows her out onto the moor." She also introduces the theme of romantic, eternal love, "There is a force that brings them [the dead] back, if their hearts were wild enough in life." These statements become the springboard into her telling the story of Cathy and Heathcliff.

Penistone Crag with Cathy and Heathcliff as children:

The castle is shot in low angle shots—we see the setting as Catherine and Heathcliff see it. This scene shows their attachment to each other and connects their relationship and them to nature. Heathcliff's dominance is suggested, as she becomes his "slave" after losing the race, a status she reaffirms after Hindley's abuse to comfort him. He later calls her his queen twice. The fantasy of prince, knights, and castle are romantic stereotypes.

Penistone Crag with Cathy and Heathcliff as young adults:

The fade after Mr. Earnshaw's death introduces a time shift. Now young adults, they escape to the castle. Cathy's social ambition and class consciousness are emphasized. As Heathcliff declares his love for her, she looks off in the distance, drawn by the ball music, thereby reflecting her ambivalence. Heathcliff and Cathy stand in shadows to watch the dancers in a lighted ballroom, shot in a low angle close-up. Cathy's approach to the Lintons' window involves a dolly up to the window from without; as the camera cuts to her face peering over the sill, she looks pleased. Heathcliff's eyes see the luxurious interior of Grange reflected in a mirror with an elaborate baroque framing. The untamed and uncivilized Catherine and Heathcliff contrast with the civilized and proper Lintons.

Penistone Crag with Cathy and Heathcliff as adults.

Cathy returns from Thrushcross Grange delighted in her dress as a lady; in her room, she views herself framed in a mirror and tears it off to resume her unrestrained "wild" dress. A long shot shows her running

to meet Heathcliff, followed by medium and long shots of the setting to create a sense of the world dominated by them and of their being at home and in harmony with nature. Heathcliff fills her arms with heather, a romantic, conventional gesture.

Cathy's degradation speech:

Heathcliff lurks in a constricted space while Cathy and Nellie speak in well-lit, spacious kitchen. Heathcliff stealthily stands in shadow in foreground of a dark, closet-like space. When Heathcliff leaves, the lighting briefly dims. Cathy announces, "I am Heathcliff," to thunder and blinding lightening.

Cathy's wedding:

A girl presents her with a bunch of heath, and she feels a cold wind. As the carriage leaves, the camera zooms to a close-up of Ellen's teary, worried face; she too felt a cold wind.

Heathcliff's return:

Heathcliff confronts Edgar and Cathy in their own deep, well-lit space. He walks from deep, deep field across the broad expanse of the Linton drawing room to the Cathy and Edgar in the foreground. After Isabella enters, shots which connect Cathy and Heathcliff alternate with shots of the three Lintons together and Heathcliff separated from them. The use of space reflects both the relationship of Heathcliff and the three Lintons and the split in Cathy between Edgar and Heathcliff. Heathcliff walks through the same deep space to leave, emphasizing his distance from the Lintons and the life they represent. The scene ends with a shot of the drawing from outside, through the window, as Heathcliff would have seen them; thus, his isolation is presented visually.

The returned Heathcliff at the ball:

He stands outside alone with Cathy in a low-key light with them in shadows, apart from others. The other characters are inside in bright lighting. Cathy and Heathcliff dominate the medium shots, and the tight frames reflect their inextricable relationship, both in this scene and in other scenes. The wind picks up as Heathcliff declares his love and his pain.

Catherine's death:

The camera focuses on Cathy's face in the longest take in the movie. In a tightly composed medium shot, they look at the moors; then we see a long shot of their backs—they dominate the shot; this domination visually asserts their relationship as the center of the film. When the doctor and Edgar enter room, they still dominate the image and are still separate. The storm continues because Heathcliff lives on after her death. Wyler ended the movie with Heathcliff's despair and anguish at Cathy's death. What follows was added at Samuel Goldwyn's insistence on a happy ending; another director filmed Nelly's narration and the happy ghost-lovers, with doubles standing in for Olivier and Oberon.

Nelly's final statement on ghosts:

When Lockwood expresses his skepticism about the existence of ghosts, Nelly muses that it's not Cathy's ghost "but Cathy's love, stronger than time itself, still sobbing for its unloved days and uneaten bread." After Kenneth describes seeing a man and woman in the snow and finding the dead Heathcliff alone, Nelly rejects his interpretation, "Not dead, not alone. He's with her. They've only just begun to live." What is being emphasized is the romantic ideal of an eternal love, a love so powerful that it lives on after death.

Audience response to the endings:

At the initial sneak preview with Wyler's ending, the audience responded negatively on the questionnaires. At a second preview with Goldwyn's ending, the audience was enthusiastically positive.