STUDY GUIDE: EMILY BRONTË’S WUTHERING HEIGHTS

Contemporary Reviews

Spectator, 1847
An attempt to give novelty and interest to fiction, by resorting to those singular 'characters' that used to exist everywhere but especially in retired and remote country places. The success is not equal to the abilities of the writer, chiefly because the incidents are too coarse and disagreeable to be attractive, the very best being improbable, with a moral taint about them, and the villainy not leading to results sufficient to justify the elaborate pains taken in depicting it. The execution, however, is good; grant the writer all that is requisite as regards matter, and the delineation is forceful and truthful.

Athenaeum, 1847
In spite of much power and cleverness; in spite of its truth to life in the removed nooks and corners of English, Wuthering Heights is a disagreeable story. The Bells seem to affect painful and exceptional subjects:--the misdeeds and oppressions of tyranny--the eccentricities of woman's fantasy! They do not turn away from dwelling on those physical acts of cruelty which we know to have their warrant in the real annals of crime and suffering,--but the contemplation of which taste rejects.

Examiner, 1847
This is a strange book. It is not without evidences of considerable power; but, as a whole, it is wild, confused, disjointed, and improbable; and the people who make up the drama, which is tragic enough in its consequences, are savages ruder than those who lived before the days of Homer.

Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper, Jan. 1848
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. . . There seems to be great power in his book but a purposeless power, which we feel a great desire to see turned to better account. We are quite confident that the writer of Wuthering Heights wants but the practiced skill to make a great artist; perhaps a great dramatic artist....

In Wuthering Heights the reader is shocked, disgusted, almost sickened by details of cruelty, inhumanity, and the most diabolical hate and vengeance, and anon come passages of powerful testimony to the supreme power of love--even over demons in the human form. The women in the book are of a strange fiendish-angelic nature, tantalizing and terrible, and the men are indescribable out of the book itself.

Britannia, Jan. 1848
We do not know whether the author writes with any purpose; but we can speak of one effect of his production. It strongly shows the brutalizing influence of unchecked passion.
Recent Critics’ Comments

Miriam Allott:
At the end, then a certain balance has been achieved.... a balance effected by a new combination of Earnshaws and Lintons, with Earnshaw energy modified by Linton calm. Heathcliff obsessions are excluded. Moreover, in order to achieve the new alliance, the Earnshaws at last abandon their old house... After three hundred years the Earnshaws withdraw from Wuthering Heights and come down to Thrushcross Grange, bringing to the valley some of their own energy but also in their turn being modified by the values it represents.

Irving H. Buchen:
[Wuthering Heights is] essentially a novel about children. The bulk of the story concerns itself with the infancy and early years first of Heathcliff, Catherine, Edgar and Isabella; and later of Linton, Cathy, and Hareton. And even when each generation grows up they are not so much adults as arrested children.

...although the novel conveys the sense of progress because of its complex forward movement and its span of three generations, it never really moves away from its preoccupation with childhood. This recurrent focus, in fact, is primarily responsible for the novel’s special achievement of timelessness.

... Consistently, Brontë speaks of the disuniting of loves or the loss of love in the same terms and with the same dimensions that she speaks of the separation of the child from God or his loss of heaven.

David Cecil:
The setting is a microcosm of the universal scheme as Emily Brontë conceived it. On the one hand, we have Wuthering Heights, the land of storm; high on the barren moorland, naked to the shock of the elements, the natural home of the Earnshaw family, fiery, untamed children of the storm. On the other, sheltered in the leafy valley below, stands Thrushcross Grange, the appropriate home of the children of calm, the gentle, passive, timid Lintons. Together each group, following its own nature in its own sphere, combines to compose a cosmic harmony. It is the destruction and re-establishment of this harmony which is the theme of the story.

John Hagan:
One of Emily Brontë’s major achievements in Wuthering Heights is to keep alive the reader’s sympathy for both Catherine and Heathcliff, even though their behavior after the former’s marriage to Edgar Linton becomes increasingly bizarre and frighteningly akin to the demonic.... far from condoning the hideous spiritual transformation which Catherine and Heathcliff undergo, Emily Brontë evokes our moral revulsion by employing all the resources of her art to bring its viciousness into the sharpest relief; at the same time, however, she never allows her hero and heroine to forfeit our compassion. This double view is essential if the final effect of the novel is to be tragic and not merely distasteful....

Wuthering Heights is such a remarkable work partly because it persuades us to forcibly pity victims and victimizers alike.
Mark Kinkead-Weekes:
...Emily Brontë has no single vision of the world. Her way of telling the novel is inseparable from what is told, in that what is told amounts to a dualistic vision, one way of seeing opposed to another. Indeed the great strength of *Wuthering Heights* is that the opposition is balanced with the most delicate and scrupulous fairness. Any choice between “the Heights” and “the Grange,” any writing up and writing down, will be the manufacture of the critic, not the novelist. Emily Brontë’s places of the heart are not stages in the development of the highest self, but different worlds, totally different sides of the self, totally different ideas of love, speaking totally different languages.

Robert C. McKibben:
Throughout the novel Ellen Dean has remained the calm in the eye of the hurricane. Secure and unassailable in her limited universe, she demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses of convention.

The atmosphere of the Heights is dominated by suffering, and the nature of this suffering is to propagate itself. One soul in torment can find relief only in the reproduction of its agony in those around it.

J. Hillis Miller:
Cathy and Heathcliff reach in death what they possessed in this world when they were unself-conscious children, and did not know of their separateness. They reach peace not through obedient acceptance of isolation, but through the final exhaustion of all their forces in an attempt to reach union in this life.

Robert M. Polhemus:
*Wuthering Heights* features the desire to transgress normal limitations, and that desire accounts for its violence and the eccentric, fascinating flow of libido in it. If we think of the three major acts and areas of erotic transgression for the nineteenth-century imagination—sadism, incest, and adultery—and then consider how the Cathy-Heathcliff story touches on them, we can see why the novel has had such a mind-jangling effect. It’s a very kinky book....

V.S. Pritchett:
Heathcliff is an understandable monster. There is a faint suggestion of the Victorian social conscience in the creation of him. He is the slum orphan. He represents, in a sense perhaps remote, the passion of the outraged poor. So utterly crushed, he will crush utterly if he arises. He has the exorbitant will to power. He would—indeed he does—run a concentration camp. In a sense the struggle between Catherine and himself is a class struggle.

Dorothy Van Ghent:
*Wuthering Heights* exists for the mind as a tension between two kinds of reality, a restrictive reality of civilized manners and codes, and the anonymous unregenerate reality of natural energies... [and] the possibility of a break-through from one mode of being into the other. The first kind of reality is given to the imagination 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... set against the wilderness of inhuman reality is the quietly secular,
voluntarily limited, safely human reality that we find in the gossipy conourse of Nelly Dean and Lockwood... The second kind of reality is given also in the romance of Cathy and Hareton... The tension between these two kinds of reality, their inveterate opposition and at the same time their continuity one with another, provides at once the content and the form of *Wuthering Heights*.

**Melvin Watson:**
Heathcliff *is* the story. He not only acts and suffers, but causes others to act and suffer; his strength permeates the story; his power for good and for evil shocks and surprises the reader; his deeds and his reactions from the ghastly beginning to the pastoral close make a coherent whole out of what might have been a chaotic heap.

**Virginia Woolf:**
She [Emily Brontë] looked out upon a world cleft into gigantic disorder and felt within her the power to unite it in a book. That gigantic ambition is to be felt throughout the novel—a struggle, half thwarted but of superb conviction, to say something through the mouths of her characters which is not merely “I love” or “I hate,” but “we, the whole human race” and “you, the eternal powers...”

**Study Questions**

What kind of life and values do *Wuthering Heights* and Thrushcross Grange represent?

Are the cruelty and violence of the characters innate or the result of and reaction to their treatment as children?

Is Heathcliff the hero? or Catherine I the heroine? Is there one hero? or one heroine?

Is Heathcliff redeemed by his passionate love for Catherine? Is his passion for Catherine selfless? Is Charlotte Brontë correct in calling his feelings “perverted passion and passionate perversity”?

Is there redemption or fulfillment in this novel?

Is fulfillment of a love like that of Catherine and Heathcliff possible in this world? Does the second generation represent a kind of love that can be fulfilled?

Is Heathcliff’s death a defeat or a victory?

Does the love of Hareton and Cathy II represent the triumph of society? some other principle? or none?

What are the various kinds of love presented in this novel? with what consequences?

Are unrestrained passion and society ultimately irreconcilable in this novel?

Are Catherine and Heathcliff reunited finally? or is the ending ambiguous, e.g., is Heathcliff’s seeing Catherine an hallucination resulting from starvation, and is the report of the shepherd boy the result of fear and superstition?
Consider the significance or the illumination of major ideas by the following sets of images or emphases: the weather; animals; windows, locked doors, and keys; books and reading; heaven and hell.

Are the characters displaced, separated, or rendered homeless (exiled) in some way? If so, do they try to find their place again?

To what extent is Nelly merely an observer in the events she narrates, and to what extent do her actions affect the events and the lives of the two Catherines, Edgar Linton, Heathcliff, Isabella, Hareton, and Lockwood? How trustworthy is she—to the other characters in the novel and for the reader? Is Nellie a villain?

Is the central theme or a major theme of this novel really childhood? or the abuse of children? or the abusiveness of the patriarchal family?

Does the first generation seek a transcendence—a striving against the isolation of the self—through union with another person? or in a higher reality? Does the second generation?

Is love an escape from emptiness, pain, and/or an unbearable existence in this novel?

Does the second generation have a necessary function, or has Brontë made a mistake? If so, how seriously is the novel flawed?

What is the function of Lockwood, the outsider? Why use him as the narrator?

Here is the URL for my discussion of *Wuthering Heights*:

http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_19c/wuthering