

# *Wuthering Heights*

## *Revision*

### Social Context:

*Wuthering Heights* was published in 1847, to a mixed critical reception. The mid-Nineteenth Century saw Britain at perhaps its peak of its Imperial power. At the time of publication, Queen Victoria had been on the throne for ten years and there had been no significant European war since 1815 (though Britain was frequently involved in Imperial conflicts around the world throughout the period). Britain was, therefore, relatively politically and economically stable – especially in contrast to the other major European powers, several of which would undergo popular revolutions in 1848.

The core economy was still based on agriculture but the Industrial Revolution was fully underway: industrialised production of cotton was increasingly important and the famous mill towns of the north were already beginning to grow, drawing in former agricultural workers who were beginning to be displaced from the land in the process of the Agricultural Revolution. There are themes reflective of this change in *Wuthering Heights*, significantly in the outsider figure of Lockwood who journeys from London to the north of England, entering a world from which his urban experience is becoming increasingly divorced.

Despite the potential to explore the social dynamics of her own time, as was the fascination for her near-contemporaries like George Eliot or Charles Dickens, Brontë instead chose to set her novel in, variously, the latter part of the Eighteenth Century and the first decade of the Nineteenth. The world her characters inhabit is significantly different to that which Brontë knew: the years which *Wuthering Heights* covers saw Europe – and Britain – embroiled in and changed by the American Revolution, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, with all the associated uncertainties and limitations on trade that these events brought.

One effect Brontë achieved in setting her novel much earlier in the century was to emphasise the ‘otherness’ of the north country. In 1847, while Brontë put the finishing touches to her novel at Haworth, the railway network reached nearby Keighley (although Haworth itself did not become connected until 1862). This new form of transport was spreading rapidly and would eventually transform southerners’ perceptions of the north as a wild and unfamiliar place. Brontë’s novel, however, relies heavily on this sense of the untamed and dangerous nature of the moors which surround *Wuthering Heights*.

There are other social elements explored in the text beyond the use of Lockwood as an outsider. The landed gentry are sometimes regarded with almost comical (to our modern eyes) deference by the servant classes such as Zillah, Nellie and Joseph. Heathcliff's transition from abused servant to respected (or feared) landowner is a crucial turning point in the plot – had he been 'suitable' marriage material then Cathy would never have considered Edgar and, conversely, when Heathcliff returns and has obtained a social standing it is the irony of the situation which arguably contributes to Cathy's decline.

Despite having Queen Victoria as head of state, the Britain of 1847 remained an inherently male-dominated society and this is reflected in the presentation of the female characters in *Wuthering Heights*. Women had few rights in the law: husbands held legal rights over wives' possessions, divorce was unobtainable without a specific Act of Parliament, and of course women would not be granted the vote until well into the Twentieth Century. Even in Brontë's 1847 society the woman's lot was not a happy one; fifty years previously social expectations of, and pressures on, women were even more conservative. Thus it is no surprise to see Isabella's character become trapped by her marriage to Heathcliff. Ironically, it is the female characters of the working class – Zillah and Nellie – who seem to have at least some degree of social freedom. Nellie in particular is perhaps an unconventional character, having received an education and having the opportunity, as nurse, to try to shape the character of her charges.

The mid-Nineteenth Century was a period of growth in literacy throughout society. Even the poorest children were supposed, following an Act of Parliament in 1844, to receive a rudimentary education. However, the readership of Brontë's novel was hardly likely to be the lower classes (not least because they were too busy working fourteen hour days in the factories). Brontë was writing for her peers; the novel was perhaps less the preserve of the woman reader than had been the case at its inception sixty or seventy years previously, but nevertheless (as exemplified by the careers of the Brontë sisters themselves) it remained a fixture of the middle-class woman's world.

**In the early Nineteenth Century, however, the novel began to gain a degree of respectability - the age of**

## **Austen marking, perhaps, a significant turning point - and by the time that the Brontës were writing it was (generally) a recognised and respected form of literature.**

Charlotte Brontë draws on some of the heritage of the form in *Wuthering Heights*. By the time she was writing, the Gothic genre had become clearly established – not least through earlier novels such as *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) revolves around subverting conventions of the genre; it is, of course, impossible to subvert conventions unless they are easily recognisable and expected. So by the time Brontë came to set her novel in a 'gothic' country house, replete with anguished ghost, she was clearly writing within a tradition that her audience both recognised and appreciated.

Brontë's novel also breaks with the traditions of the form, however. Her determination to capture the dialect of (particularly) Joseph, seeking to create a realistic voice for a lower-class and, frankly, unsympathetic character was heavily criticised on the book's publication and remains a stumbling block for many a modern reader. However, the recognition of the right of non-standard literary voices to be heard as authentically as possible was not new: in 1798 Wordsworth and Coleridge published their *Lyrical Ballads*, which deliberately set out to create and sustain believable lower-class voices. The novelty in *Wuthering Heights* was the transfer of this recognition of lower class voice into the novel.

Brontë constructs two narrators who are also characters in their own rights, rather than just ciphers for her own authorial point of view. We gain a sense of Nellie as a slightly unreliable narrator – from her moralising on Cathy's fate to her presentation of herself as someone who looks to defend weaker characters (especially children) – we gain a sense of her self-construction. Lockwood seems less fleshed-out in some ways. It may be argued that Brontë struggled convincingly to create a male voice, but it is perhaps more valid to suggest that Lockwood's character is less developed because, ultimately, he is simply a tool: Nellie is telling her stories 'to' Lockwood but, of course, she is really speaking to us. Lockwood acts as a literary conceit, mediating communication between a voice from the lower classes and Brontë's more monied readership. However, his outsider's perspective is vital, allowing his character to support the reader on the journey, sharing confusions with him at different turning points in the narrative: we are not left alone to explore this alien world.

### **Aspects of the Gothic** **Knowledge:**

*Wuthering Heights* is essentially a novel about the revelation of secrets. We, with Lockwood, work our way gradually into the heart of the microcosm Brontë's created

based around Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. Some secrets remain unresolved throughout – for example, the manner in which Heathcliff made his money – and this sense of other stories remaining untold adds to the brooding atmosphere of the text.

### **Title:**

Of the two houses in the text, Wuthering Heights is intrinsically more Gothic in sound and subsequent description. By giving the book this title, Brontë is emphasising the importance of this very particular place in the narrative. The gloom and threat associated with ‘wuthering’ captures the dark mood that pervades much of the text, while ‘heights’ brings connotations not only of the heights of passion that, for instance, Heathcliff feels in his love for Cathy, but also reminds us of the heights from which families can fall. It is interesting to note that many other Gothic texts have high locations in them

### **The Night:**

Many key events occur at night in the narrative – most strikingly, perhaps, the visitation by Cathy that Lockwood receives early in the text. Night time also adds danger to the already threatening moors, making them even more treacherous to cross than usual: the night brings imprisonment and isolation.

### **Violence Horror and Terror:**

Brontë makes selective use of horror in the text, the most horrific elements being perhaps Lockwood’s desperate grinding of Cathy’s arm on the broken window and Heathcliff’s interference with her grave. Terror is less clearly definable in the text; what terror is developed tends to aggregate around the character of Heathcliff who is, after all, so unknowable as to only have one name; the sense of desperate nihilism and destruction he brings may well have proved more terrifying to Brontë’s original readership than they do to us today, although paradoxically this also accounts, perhaps, for the attractiveness of the character to female readers.

### **Supernatural:**

Leaving aside the visit of the ghost of Cathy – something which is never entirely categorised as to whether it was real or just a dream – there is nothing of the conventionally supernatural in the text. Joseph’s determined religiosity may be seen as a way of maintaining a supernatural element within the text (although the gulf between his outward piety and his actual failure to refuse to work for the morally corrupt landowners suggests Brontë was rather using this to reveal hypocrisy than to reflect on the role of salvation in any of the characters’ lives). A more potent force is perhaps that of the natural, rather than the supernatural: the **sublime**, the sense of awe engendered by and in both the beauty and danger of nature pervades the text, and links closely to the characters of Cathy and Heathcliff, both of whom are described almost as forces of nature.

### **Transgressive Females:**

Cathy's childhood friendship with Heathcliff was socially transgressive, while the emotional bond between them may be argued to border on something approaching incestuous – both of them had the same father-figure (and some critics have argued that Heathcliff's mysterious arrival at Wuthering Heights is indicative that he was actually Cathy's illegitimate half-brother). However, Cathy is not the only transgressive female; Isabella ignores her brother's warnings and is ultimately socially ostracised due to her fascination with Heathcliff. Even Nellie can be read as something of a transgressive character, given her experience of learning through the library at the Heights; the two conflicting sides of her personality are reflected in the duality of her name – Ellen is much more refined than Nellie, although both are used depending on context.

### **Narrative:**

Good for AO2 in terms of Form / Structure. The multi-layered narration draws us in but also acts as a brake on our understanding, enabling Brontë to control the pace at which she reveals – or fails to reveal – key information. The ambiguity about who is speaking at times adds to the text's underlying feelings of confusion and uncertainty.

### **Blood:**

The image of Lockwood grating the ghost's hand on the broken window until the blood runs down onto the counterpane is about as physically gruesome as *Wuthering Heights* gets, but the scarceness of blood elsewhere in the text makes this passage particularly memorable. There are, of course, plenty of instances of violence throughout the text – usually involving Heathcliff as either victim or instigator – but they seem largely to be bloodless. There is perhaps an irony in only a ghost bleeding...

### **Revenge:**

Heathcliff blames the world for the loss of Cathy – he blames his experiences at the hands of Hindley for limiting him in his youth; he blames Edgar's marriage to her for ruining their relationship when he returns. He sets out to exact a revenge on the world, raising Hareton in the same conditions as he suffered at Hindley's hands, and marrying Isabella to spite her brother (Edgar). In contrast to Macduff in *Macbeth*, whose quest for vengeance is presented sympathetically and raises him to the status of a hero, Heathcliff's revenge is a destructive and consuming force. However, it does – as with Satan in *Paradise Lost* – provide him with the energy to continue to exist.

### **Language, Form and Structure:**

| Quotation   | Development  |
|---|--|
| 'he's more myself than I am' - Catherine on Heathcliff  | An example of Catherine as transgressive: the bond she feels with Heathcliff is all-consuming, even consuming her sense of identity - something that 'should' only happen in marriage.   |
| 'In every cloud, in every tree... I am surrounded with her image!' - Heathcliff on Catherine  | Heathcliff sees Cathy in nature, linking her with the natural world rather than the world of man.  |
| 'I love my murderer!' - Heathcliff to Catherine   | At first strikingly Christian in tone, but consideration places this firmly in the Gothic - Heathcliff is accusing Cathy of killing part of him in her death, and goes on to accuse her practically of self-murder - suicide still being very much a taboo.  |
| 'fiendish', 'imp of satan', 'demon', 'not a human being', 'devil daddy', 'monster' - descriptions of Heathcliff   | Rather self-explanatory, one feels...  |
| 'everything.. lay in misty darkness' - outside the Heights  | The surrounding darkness makes the Heights seem, ironically perhaps, some sort of haven. The mist adds to the sense of the unknown and danger out in the real world; it is as if the inhabitants of the Heights are separated from society by something greater than distance.   |
| 'grotesque carving lavished on the door' - Wuthering Heights  | Adding to the generic Gothic feel by aging the house.  |
| 'I cannot live without my soul' - Heathcliff on Catherine   | Echoes Catherine's declaration that she and Heathcliff are one. Brings associations of bodies without souls (vampires, the undead etc).  |
| 'God won't have the satisfaction that I shall' - Heathcliff on revenge  | Revenge may be seen as a key Gothic theme (see above): Heathcliff's takes years to effect, but is ultimately his only motivational force.  |
| 'I... wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth' - Lockwood at the graves of Catherine, Linton and Heathcliff | The concluding sentence of the text draws us back to death and to the love-triangle at the heart of the plot. Lockwood's wondering seems as if he is trying to rationalise events, but comes on the back of the peasant boy swearing he saw the ghosts of Cathy and Heathcliff - spirits united at last. It is an ambiguous ending, in keeping with the rest of the text: we are not sure what is and what is not, nor whether Cathy's love for Linton ever outweighed her attachment to Heathcliff. |
| 'Terror made me cruel' - Lockwood's response to the ghost of Catherine  | Brontë has built up the terror of this passage - the enclosing tomb-like bed, the voice of Catherine expressed in her journal, the nightmare Lockwood has suffered: all conspire to bring us the most traditionally Gothic phase of the narrative.   |
| 'I pulled its wrist on to the broken pane and rubbed it to and fro 'til the blood ran down and soaked the bed clothes' - ditto!                                   | As above, with added blood.  |
| 'as if craving alms of the sun' - Lockwood's impression of the trees at Wuthering Heights   | The wind-swept nature of the Heights is emphasised - a nature which can make things twisted and misshapen, just like Heathcliff's soul has become...   |

### **Structure:**

Brontë makes the most of the opportunities presented by having two narrative voices; she carefully controls the release of plot information and can deflate the development of tension by, for example, having Lockwood interrupt Nellie's narrative.

The narrative is presented as deliberately non-linear but, all the events of *Wuthering Heights* can be unravelled and reconstructed against a fixed time-line. There are certain significant jumps in the narrative, and substantial elements are not filled in at all (for example Heathcliff's activities outside the text) but, because of the nature of the structure, these are less strikingly obvious than may otherwise have been the case.

Brontë deliberately makes use of mirroring within the text. In part this is driven by plot – Heathcliff suffered at the hands of Hindley, so Hindley's son suffers at the hands of Heathcliff – but there is also a sense of things going in a cyclical manner: by the end of the text Hareton and Catherine, whose social stations echo those previously of Heathcliff and Cathy, are married – in some way, perhaps, providing a happy ending, echoed in the report of Heathcliff and Cathy's ghosts being united at last. The resolved ending is something of a Gothic trope –there is a degree of ambiguity in *Wuthering Heights*: will the future really be happier than the past, given how damaged the characters have been?

### **Form:**

Brontë's earlier foray into poetry suggests that she was determined to find literary success, but how far this shaped her construction of the text is debatable. At its heart *Wuthering Heights* is a combination of two popular forms of fiction – the Gothic novel and the Romance – rather than overtly literary. It may be that her shade is looking on with wry surprise at how far her tale of ordinary Yorkshire folk has become an established literary text.

As with *Dracula*, the opportunities for multiple narrative voices (beyond Lockwood and Nellie's narration we have Cathy's diary entries and assorted letters) broadened the palette available to Brontë. However, the two core narratives do rely on the traditional suspension of disbelief associated with first person narration – that is to say, no 'real' story could be conveyed in such authoritative detail, remembering clearly precise turns of phrase which were said, in some cases, decades previously. This tension in the reliability of the narrators adds to the tension throughout the text.

### **Exam / Revision Technique**

## Heights-specific Past Questions

'In the world of *Wuthering Heights* extremes of behaviour are presented as the norm and moderation is neither known nor desired.' To what extent do you agree with this view of the novel?

'Violence breeds violence.' In the light of this comment, consider Emily Brontë's presentation of violence in the novel.

"In *Wuthering Heights* death is seen as a welcome release from the tortures of living." How far do you agree with this view of the novel?

How far do you agree with the view that in *Wuthering Heights* more suffering is inflicted by mental cruelty than physical cruelty?

## Top tips!

1. Different types of response, quality of writing, terminology - "poor quality of writing is self-penalising", "a structured essay IS good"
2. Analysis of form, structure and language - "structure of text"
3. Connections and comparisons between texts ideas - informed by interpretations of other readers - "connections based on genre"
4. Significance of contexts in which literary texts are written and received - other texts written in that period, features of its own context (eg *Wuthering Heights* as romantic/gothic) NOT bolt on facts about Gothic and Brontë, etc.

## Basic Revision:

1. Reread your texts
2. Choose key quotes for each character
3. Link your text ideas with gothic concepts - which ones work well and which don't?
4. Unpack ALL of the Topics
5. Write responses to difficult questions