

## Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*: An Unconventional Victorian Masterpiece

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### Abstract

*Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte (1818-1848) is a novel which is windswept and weather-beaten both in the world outside and in the world inside of human emotion. The total book leaves a deep impression of an intense but dreary romantic view of life and of an unusual mystery and conflict. None of the Victorian novelists has been able to create these traits. Some of Emily's characters appear like creatures of their autonomous, unreal world. This paper shows that the novel is an expression of Emily's rare sense of imagination that is absent in many other contemporary novelists. It also shows that Emily paints an unusual love before which the demonic passion melts. So, this novel stands far apart from other Victorian masterpieces. Not only this, *Wuthering Heights* does not portray Victorian realism which is the focal point of most of the Victorian great novels.

**Keywords:** Unconventional, love, mystery, cruelty, Victorian, realism

### Introduction

*Wuthering Heights* is an absorbing story and a carefully organized work of art. Unlike other Victorian novels, *Wuthering Heights* concerns itself with the inner adventures of feeling and imagination, with the emphasis laid on physical adventures. When viewed from the point of excitement and tension or, rather, as an outer adventure story, we find Emily Bronte's novel perfect in such situations. Taking the story in a nutshell, it could be well illustrated thus: A man spends a night in a lonely house on the moors. There is a great storm and snow, the weather is frightful. A father brings home a wild and strange boy whom he found lost in the streets of Liverpool. The foundling is adopted, but is unaccepted by some members of the family. The real son of the family hates the adopted boy and grows up harbouring great jealousy in his mind. The sister likes the strange boy and gradually with the passage of years, a deep-rooted love grows between them. The father dies and the real son degrades and humiliates the adopted boy. The sister marries a man of a high station, but never ceases loving the foundling whom she has left behind. In the end she wills her own death, after giving birth to a girl. The lover carries out a ruthless plan of revenge on all his victims. The ghost of his beloved haunts him and he has no other thought in his life and is ever ready to attune himself with her spirit. For the fulfillment of his plans, at one time, he forcibly marries the daughter of the dead woman to his own son. In the

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end, after the death of his son, and a happy love affair of his daughter in-law, he dies. The final impression is that his spirit is united with that of the woman whom he has loved. There are hints of the comings and goings of her ghost.

Emily Bronte used two narrators to describe her story with the help of other minor characters. Heathcliff, the central character of the novel, is a rare creation. He does not know about his origin. Emily Bronte not only makes him an unconventional lover but also an unconventional Victorian character. Though he is a very rude and cruel person, he betrays an unusual love for Catherine. We see that he is a vengeful protagonist and at the time of taking revenge he becomes a monster. On the other hand, when Cathy stands before him, a transformation takes place in the inhuman tumultuous nature of Heathcliff and he forgets all his brutality. Emily's sister Charlotte Bronte calls *Wuthering Heights* 'a rude and strange production.'<sup>1</sup>

### **Emily and the Major Victorian Novelists: A Discussion**

Reading the novel, we realise that Emily Bronte skillfully combines the situations of mystery story with the inner adventures and tensions of the characters. Emily creates a special power and grandeur throughout her book. If we are left to make our own judgment, we see that the author unlike the other Victorian novelists of her time, does not moralize. *Wuthering Heights* has a code of conduct which springs from the very natural impulses of man. What the main characters think and feel and what they do, are not based on contemporary considerations of society.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century society shows rich diversity in different aspects. Of these aspects, fiction was the true reflection. The dominant feature of the novel was that its subject matter quickly expanded. Charles Dickens (1812-1870) who is said to be the greatest Victorian novelist descended into the subterranean life of London for themes. In his semi-autobiographical novel *David Copperfield*, Dickens' world is populated by a large number of people of wide variety. Anthony Trollope (1815-1888) depicted the typical society of Cathedral town. William Makepeace Thackeray (1811- 1863) wrote about the upper classes. His *Vanity Fair* is at once an anatomy of society and the epic of a great adventure. Charlotte Bronte (1816-1855) handled her personal experiences. Mrs. Gaskell (1810-1865) found materials in the conflicts of labour and capital in a manufacturing town. There emerged the novels of warfare of crime and detection and many other types. But the general tendency was towards realism though they often found a mixed romantic treatment. The novelists producing their novels and masterpieces in the Victorian era ranging from pre-Victorian to late Victorian have dealt with the themes of realism and romance, crime and adventure and conflicts and exploration. But Emily Bronte, with her gifted genius, presented a singular novel called *Wuthering Heights*, breaking away from the common convention made by the other Victorian novelists. Structurally, it stands apart from all other Victorian masterpieces. Thematically, it outshines as an ever brilliant star in the firmament of Victorian fiction literature. Characteristically, Emily's masterpiece, though not a voluminous one, is a peerless and matchless contribution of lyrical prose to the world of English literature. In character delineation, Emily followed her own technique. Unlike other Victorian novelists, Emily created a rare psychological insight into the nature of her main characters. The human relationship in her novel is looked upon

with unconventional manners. The language of this poetic novel is very lucid and vibrant. The haunting quality of this novel is its chronology of events and situations very gently depicted with so fine a brush. The introduction of atmospheric gloom and the supernatural elements separate this novel from other Victorian fictions.

Besides, in depicting life around her, Emily evinces an all penetrating psychological insight which is rarely found in other Victorian novels. Though she shows that life is the embodiment of good and evil, its attitudes and social motives are different from the fictional life portrayed by other Victorian novelists. In *Wuthering Heights*, the total life is viewed through inexhaustible passion, crime, loss, grief, Satanism and confusion. A simple story between a dark boy and a fair girl gradually grows to be a grotesque one and ultimately ends in silent peace. So, *Wuthering Heights* stands shining in its own autonomous world. It is not only an unconventional Victorian novel with all these traits, but it belongs to all ages as a monumental masterpiece, always ever new.

### ***Wuthering Heights* is a novel without parallel**

*Wuthering Heights* is a strange Victorian novel without any parallel. 'This intense, solidly imagined novel is distinguished from other novels of the period by its dramatic and poetic presentation, its abstention from authorial intrusion, and its unusual structure'.<sup>ii</sup> Emily explores two worlds: the world of the passionate emotions of love and revenge as symbolized by *Wuthering Heights* ('wuthering' is a Yorkshire dialect word for stormy weather ), and the rational, civilized world symbolized by Thruscross Grange. The world of *Wuthering Heights* is often cruel and barbaric as in Heathcliff's monstrous revenge against Hindley and Lintons. But it is also capable of a passionate love that transcends even death.

If the world of Thurscross Grange is cozy, comfortable, and civilized, it is somewhat bloodless and ineffectual. The setting of these two worlds of passion and reason against each other over the course of three generations is the essence of the book.<sup>iii</sup>

Though the emotions and violent passion of the book point to gothic structures, Emily maintains control and sophistication of the book, by avoiding fully the conventions of Victorian fiction. The moorland setting gives the novel a power beyond anything else. Her use of nature images to express the moods of the characters in different situations is handled very adroitly. The presentation of Emily's scene in her strangely moving novel is quite different from others. About this Abraham Lass says:

If the typical scene of the Victorian novel is a rectory garden or a middle-class drawing room, the typical scene of *Wuthering Heights* is a storm-swept, infinitely lonely moor. In this sense the novel is imaginatively closer to the world of *King Lear* than to the comfortable world of Victorian fiction.<sup>iv</sup>

Abraham Lass has possibly rightly brought out his comparison in his critical opinion between Shakespeare and Emily. It is in the third Act of *King Lear* that he (the king) 'has disappeared into a world which is all foul weather and inhuman storm. He tears his white hair in the blast and

Strives in his little world of man to out-scorn  
The to-and-for conflicting wind and rain.<sup>v</sup>

The typical scene in *King Lear* as in *Wuthering Heights* is murky. The old king is forced to go out in the violent thunder storm and rain. Again the monstrous villainous passion of Edmund, Regan and Goneril resembles the violent destructive passion of Heathcliff. So the Shakespearean passion in a dramatic situation is reflected in *Wuthering Heights* rather than the normal limits of the dramatic moments in the Victorian fictions.

Much of the interest of *Wuthering Heights* lies in its haunting quality. The terror, the excitement and tension depends very much on its supernatural elements. So this is a nightmare novel. It is possibly because of 'the fact that there must have been powerful forces working in Emily Bronte while she was writing it of which she herself cannot have been fully conscious.'<sup>vi</sup> However, Emily upholds a belief that the relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine is not destroyed even in death. Indeed, this adds an ever new charm to the novel which no other Victorian novelist could ever make.

### **The Vision of Emily Projected in *Wuthering Heights***

*Wuthering Heights* is a great popular Victorian novel. Its readers and admirers are undoubtedly more in number than those of the other English novels. The special appeal of this grand novel is universal and even in modern time its growing acceptance is ascertained. Elaborate criticism has been made of this novel to appreciate the total organization and construction of the work along with the vision of the artist. The very spirit of the work has been highly admired and captures the inner feelings of the readers.

The novelist's vision of life is particularly mysterious in nature. Her imagination displays a rare ingenuity in forging a quite new theme for her literary production. No other English novelist could have presented such a theme, enunciating touching aspects of both outer and inner life.

The novel is not 'moral' or 'immoral'. As a result, it proves that Emily was not interested in conventional ideas of good and evil. *Wuthering Heights* in fact presents an aesthetic sense which is as delightful as soul-ravishing. Besides, a mystic vision is discernible in this novel, especially in the profound feelings and emotion and elemental and ethereal aspects of the characters.

For Emily, literature is not the criticism of life, rather it illumines life. So the novel is a bright projection of revelation of the vision of the novelist. The struggle of the protagonist is deeply psychological and spiritual. There is hardly any element of sex in the love of Heathcliff and Catherine. It is difficult to plumb the depth of the intensity of Heathcliff's love. Again Catherine's

love is genuine and pure when she says 'Nelly, I am Heathcliff'. This sense of oneness in human conduct is a revelation for which one may consider this novel as an unconventional Victorian masterpiece.

No sentimental excess is found in *Wuthering Heights*, but it is one of the favourite elements of Victorian fiction literature. However, Emily's amoral view of life, which is now a modern concept, is entirely unconventional and it points to her originality. Emily always nurtures a conviction of her own and this separates her from all other novelists, both Victorian and non-Victorian.

About characterisation Hudson says,

In the one case the novelist portrays his characters from the outside, dissects their passions, motives, thoughts and feelings, explains comments, and often pronounces authoritative judgment upon them. In the other case, he stands apart, allows his characters to reveal themselves through speech and action, and reinforces their self-delineation by the comments and judgments of other characters in the story.<sup>vii</sup>

But, often we may observe a distinct bias towards one or the other. Thackeray, though he introduces indirect method, presents an enormous amount of personal interpretation and criticism. George Eliot (1819-1880) has seriously overdone direct analysis in her novels. In Jane Austen's (1775-1817) works, the dramatic element predominates. Her men and women portray themselves through dialogue while she throws cross-lights upon them.

*Wuthering Heights* gives us a special variety and a considerable range of characterisation. The two main characters are Heathcliff and Catherine and the plot of the novel revolves around their rare love. Heathcliff's life is governed by two elemental passions, one is his fiery but genuine love for Catherine and the other is his determination to have revenge on all those standing as barriers on his way. Except Mr. Earnshaw and Cathy he had hatred from others and this awoke revenge motive in him. To all he turned diabolical, a monster but to Cathy he proved himself a love-lorn human being. There is no such character in Victorian Literature nurturing such sharp diametrically opposite nature. When Cathy died, to him, 'there was nothing remarkable beneath the visiting moon.' He cried out in anguish for Catherine: "Be with me always-take any form-drive me mad ---- I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!"<sup>viii</sup> However, *Wuthering Heights* centers on Heathcliff, the most fascinating and true hero-villain of the Romantic Age. Heathcliff is consumed with a demonic passion that destroys the life which is less vigorous around him. But, he himself is also destroyed by it.

Cathy is a tragic heroine. She is well aware of the inhuman element in Heathcliff's nature. Nevertheless, her world appears different. In a speech that is often quoted, Cathy describes to Nelly the great difference between the two kinds of love which she cherishes in her heart. Her love for Edger, she says, is like the foliage in the woods: time will change it, as winter changes

the trees. Her love for Heathcliff, she says, resembles the eternal rocks; a source of little visible delight, but necessary. And then she adds: 'Nelly, I am Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind.' These words represent a complete identification of Cathy with Heathcliff. A little before that she had said to Nelly:

My great miseries in this world have been Heathcliff's miseries....My great thought in living is himself. If all else perished and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger.<sup>ix</sup>

However, Cathy was a divided personality in love. At last she died giving birth to a child. Any other character like Cathy in other Victorian novels is not found. Beeky Sharpe in *Vanity Fair* only looks pretty and intelligent, but Amelia is something of a conventional rather passive and good woman of Victorian type. 'Dickens is sometimes accused of writing characters who do not develop or change during the course of novel.' This criticism was also made during his life time. His novels are sometimes described as a social panorama. In the words of Emile Legouis,

She (Emily Bronte) left a strange novel, *Wuthering Heights*, wherein among her passionately loved moors she set a tragedy of love at once fantastic and powerful, savage and moving, a nightmarish story which strangely blends virginal ignorance with lightning - like intuition. There is no other book which contains so many of the troubled, tumultuous, and rebellious elements of romanticism.<sup>x</sup>

The character of Heathcliff is very complex. His obsession with the dead Catherine keeps his imagination fixed on her grave. Such a lover like Heathcliff is not found in the whole of Victorian Literature. Though he is a villain, he achieves the readers' sympathy for his sufferings of life. He attracts and repulses at the same time. As a man he is violent and brutal and his actions in many situations repel us. But his singular love for a singular person Cathy is born out of profound attachment and his cruelty melts here and this instance is not discernible in other Victorian masterpieces. Thus it can be said that *Wuthering Heights* is an unconventional Victorian masterpiece.

### **Narrative Technique**

In the successful construction of *Wuthering Heights* Emily shows her careful creative quality. She ingeniously combines dialogue, atmosphere, characterisation and background to bring about an impressive effect. In fact, throughout the novel the homely and familiar and the wild and extravagant go together. The former provides a setting for the latter. The novel presents a carefully patterned weaving of multiple contrasts between storm and calm, represented respectively by life at the Heights and life at the Grange.

The story concerns itself with the relationships existing between two families-the Earnshaws and the Lintons. A few minor characters also add substance to the main structural framework of the novel. In the novel, the first person narrative method is employed.

*Wuthering Heights* is one of the supreme masterpieces of English romanticism. There are two narrators; they are Lockwood and Nelly Dean. 'The story is recounted by Lockwood, a disinterested party, whose narrative serves as the frame for a series of retrospective starter narratives by Nelly Dean, a housekeeper.'<sup>xi</sup> From this opinion one thing is clear that the two narrators are not a party to the main drama of the story. They are rather selfless narrators.

The novel is based on a sound device. The present and the past are blended skillfully. This sort of technique is absent in Victorian novels. Nelly invests the story with a life like quality through her conversational tone and mannerism of speech. This heightens the charm of the technique, when Nelly is describing the happenings to Lockwood, he feels more interested and asks Nelly to continue her account,

sit still, Mrs. Dean, do sit still, another half hour : You've done just right to tell the story leisurely ; that is the method I like ; and you must finish it in the same style. I am interested in every character you have mentioned.<sup>xii</sup>

Though the main body of the plot presents itself up to chapter XXX, the climax has not been unraveled. Thus, after the end of Nelly's story, the scene shifts back to the present again, and then Lockwood's act again begins. In the last three chapters Lockwood gets the finishing touches of the story through Nelly Dean. The artistry of the narrative structure clearly reveals a new model dreamt by Emily, a Victorian consummate literary craftsman quite unlike others.

## Conclusion

*Wuthering Heights* is a supreme triumph of English romanticism. It sincerely provides an intense but dreary romantic view of life. 'A terrible beauty is born' in Emily's novel, a beauty to which strangeness has been added. Like the other Romantics, she sets a greater store by feelings and emotions. The primary passion, passion of love, is her theme in *Wuthering Heights*, and she lays bare to us the hearts of her two principal characters, Heathcliff and Catherine. Though theirs is a love which may be described, in a sense, as 'asexual', it has its aching joys and dizzy raptures, its depth as well as its tumult. David Daiches aptly says, 'We might almost say that one of the insights achieved by the novel is that what is most natural is by very virtue of its being most natural also most unnatural.'<sup>xiii</sup> Thus Emily's extraordinary achievement in the novel is the domiciling of the monstrous in the ordinary rhythms of life and work.

The action of *Wuthering Heights* acquires a dramatic quality. It has the witchery and suspense of Coleridge and not the crudity of the Gothic romance. Its cosmic range has its dramatic analogue in Shakespeare's greatest tragedy *King Lear*. For Emily Bronte, as for Shakespeare, 'ripeness is all'. No other Victorian novelist is so closer to Shakespeare in terms of having this quality of ripeness. Therefore, this concept regarding *Wuthering Heights* proves that it is a great literary Victorian literary masterpiece, characterized by its own haunting features and bright aspects that are memorable and undoubtedly unconventional.

## References

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When Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* was first published in 1847, under the name of Ellis Bell, it received mixed reviews. In *Wuthering Heights*, one of the main female characters dies of what could also be considered a broken heart, but the effect is a very different one from that of Charlotte Temple. Instead of presenting an overly sentimental worst-case scenario meant to frighten its readers onto the straight-and-narrow, *Wuthering Heights* seduces its readers with its dark passion and misguided characters. Both Heathcliff and Catherine are flawed characters, but their flaws intrigue the reader just as surely as they repel.