

A GLIMPSE INTO WUTHERING HEIGHTS

Elena Atudosiei

PhD Student, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași

Abstract: There are various aspects one can analyse when speaking about the works written by the Brontë sisters and different interpretations have been presented over the years. We will focus on Emily Brontë's novel, "Wuthering Heights", on the characters and on what they stand for. We will focus especially on Catherine and Heathcliff, while bringing into discussion other important characters as well, from a feminist perspective, with elements from psychoanalysis. In order to do so, we will also highlight certain aspects regarding the Victorian Age in order to see the role played by context in building and analysing the characters and their motivation.

Key words: wuthering heights, emily brontë, feminism, psychoanalysis, the victorian age

Wuthering Heights is the only novel written by Emily Jane Brontë, one which was not considered commercially successful by the time she died. It was not known during her lifetime that the author was a woman; since women writers were not particularly well received in the nineteenth century, the Brontë sisters chose male pseudonyms. We must view the critical reception of *Wuthering Heights* from this perspective: if the author was a man, the style in which it was written and the power that shocked contemporary critics was perfectly acceptable and admired... but the same cannot be said if the story was the product of a woman's mind. Besides the fact that it would be considered beyond good taste, it was difficult to accept that a respectable woman could create such a novel. It was a time when a book was judged not only from an aesthetic perspective, but also through the prejudices concerning the role of women in society. Those like George Henry Lewes looked down upon women writers, claiming that they should fill their time with other (domestic) activities. If, by any chance, they could write, they should not develop their talent. Many others shared his opinion, so women who did want to write had to go against the conventional image of a perfect lady (the angel of the house, submissive, gentle, calm, loving). Just like her sisters, Emily Brontë understood that if she signed her prose and poetry with her real name, she risked being overlooked. Having to resort

to a male pen name to even hope that she will be taken seriously reflects some of the attitudes that held women back in the nineteenth century.

Emily Brontë never married, she had quite a reclusive life and she was suffering from tuberculosis when the novel was written and published. Homesickness and depression did not allow her to spend too much time away from home, so it was only for short periods that she was away at school, as a student or as a teacher, or somewhere else working as a governess. And yet she created a brilliant work of fiction. The question many asked themselves was “how did she do it?”. One of the hypotheses was that *Wuthering Heights* actually belonged to Charlotte Brontë. Such an idea seems to be the basis for melodrama and it can be proven wrong by simply taking the time to analyse this novel in comparison to *Jane Eyre* by looking at the style and way in which the main characters are built, as well as at the ethical and psychological perspectives¹. Everything is different, starting from certain aspects concerning the lives of the two sisters: while Emily was educated mostly at home, Charlotte travelled more and had the opportunity to see the world through different eyes. What about the characters? Jane Eyre is fit for melodrama, but Catherine is the type of character found in a tragedy. Jane is true to herself and refuses any compromise (like becoming Rochester’s mistress or St John’s wife). Her nature, her essence is placed above what was considered proper within society. What happens to Catherine is a whole different story. Let us look at the fact that she writes her name in three different ways (Catherine Earnshaw, Catherine Heathcliff and Catherine Linton). “Earnshaw” is the name of her father, but the other two names mark the fact that she cannot find her own identity because she is torn between two men (between the id and the super-ego, nature and society), something that will lead her to an early grave. Her signing in different ways may also be a symbol for the lack of identity of women in a patriarchal society². The answer to the previous question would be that Emily Brontë was able to imagine a work like the one she left behind because, like Jane Austen before her, she was a genius writer.

Margaret Homans draws a parallel between Lockwood and Catherine, starting from Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory (boys and girls enter language differently; the boys learn to look for substitutes of their mothers and move more easily into the linguistic realm).

¹ Cuțitaru, Codrin Liviu. *Femei victoriene*, România literară, nr 40/ 9 octombrie 2009.

² Some eighty years later, we see that the issue of female identity is a literary theme still present in the works of writers like Virginia Woolf. From the very first pages of *Mrs Dalloway*, we meet the protagonist and one of the most important things we learn about her is that she is no longer Clarissa, she is simply Mrs. Richard Dalloway. The young girl she once was and the married woman have little to nothing in common. Clarissa lost her identity and became more like an extension of her husband.

He prefers substitutions over something real. The girl he liked stopped being desirable the moment she gave signs that she might return his feelings. When he goes to Thrushcross Grange, Cathy becomes his new object of desire, although she does not know anything about this. Just like he cannot face his feelings, he cannot face nature directly. On the other hand, Catherine embraces it, preferring to spend her time in the moors rather than studying and spending her time indoors. Her preferences are not to be attributed to all women; we see that her daughter, Cathy, tries to educate Hareton (who will eventually become the new master of Wuthering Heights) and she does her best to be a part of the patriarchal world. In the end, she is to be married and, by stepping into a new phase of her life, she will take on not only her husband's name, but also that of her grandfather. It is suggested that Brontë draws two responses to the issue of women estrangement: up to a point, Catherine refuses to enter what Lacan calls "the Symbolic Order" (when she does try to rise to the expectations of society, she ends up destroying herself). Cathy is different because she not only enters the Order, but she learns in time how to make use of it, even if not with the same authority as men do. From this point of view, Cathy is like Brontë herself, although Homans implies that maybe a situation like Catherine's, away from the order, would be tempting for the writer. Because she decided to write, Emily Brontë tried to give a new definition to her gender, forming a new relation with men, language and writing.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar name *Wuthering Heights* a "Bible of hell" and present the influence Milton's *Paradise Lost* had on this novel: we see heaven and hell (which, for Catherine, are the equivalent of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, of nature and society), where Heathcliff is seen as the devil³ (or a Byronic hero) who brings rebellion in heaven and where "the fall" of the two characters is presented. But which place is heaven and which one is hell? One would be tempted to say that Wuthering Heights stands for nature, wilderness and hell, while Thrushcross Grange is a symbol for civilisation and heaven. And that is probably true, but not for Catherine. For her, there is no better place to be than Wuthering Heights⁴, where she could be free and happy with Heathcliff. Once she exits this secluded place, the girl becomes a woman, but during this process she loses her identity and in the end she is destroyed by what is seen as heaven. She feels imprisoned and her health starts to decline,

³ E.g. In chapter 13, Isabella asks: "Is Mr. Heathcliff a man? If so, is he mad? And if not is he a devil?"

⁴ "If I were in heaven, Nelly, I should be extremely miserable. [...] I dreamt once that I was there. [...] heaven did not seem to be my home, and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights, where I woke sobbing for joy." (chapter IX)

with no hope of ever getting better, even when her childhood friend returns. She can no longer return to girlhood and the only available path leads towards “madness” and self-destruction. We are told that it is impossible to escape a system which denies women their autonomy and free will. Heathcliff, the one who (according to Catherine) is more like herself than she is, comes back, but they can no longer become one. Her fall is not without consequences even after she is no longer alive, influencing the destinies of her daughter (who manages to save herself) and of Isabella Linton, as we will see later on.

Gilbert and Gubar also draw parallels between Brontë’s creation and Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, highlighting some of their common features from which we get a clear image of what interests us – the way in which Brontë builds a new universe (full of mysteries and unsolved problems, a true puzzle) and, more importantly, the characters that inhabit this world. There is something else underneath the surface, complex structures, allusions and not a very clear distinction between good and evil (in other words, ambiguous morality). What we read is only the tip of the iceberg. For instance, we know little about Heathcliff; we are told that he is a gypsy boy found by Mr Earnshaw in the streets of Liverpool and taken to be raised at Wuthering Heights⁵. But what if Heathcliff is in fact Mr Earnshaw’s son and Catherine and Hindley’s half-brother? Because that is the conclusion the reader draws from the way the master of Wuthering Heights treats the boy, better than his legitimate son⁶. We cannot put our complete trust in any narrator, not even in Nelly Dean, but we can build the story on what they let us know. We are given different perspectives over the same events and the absence of an omniscient narrator forbids access to the whole story of the characters. Gilbert and Gubar also point out the fact that the Brontë sisters were influenced in their writings by the loss of their mother at a very early age. The two critics call *Wuthering Heights* “a motherless book” and note that “all the Brontë novels betray intense feelings of motherlessness, orphanhood, destitution” (Gilbert, Gubar, p 251).

The issue of identity must not be overlooked when analysing *Wuthering Heights*. We saw that Catherine comes to a point where she can no longer find her true self, but Gilbert and Gubar go further with their study: Heathcliff’s condition is presented the same as that of a woman. Going even further, we notice that he is called not “him” but “it” when he is brought

⁵ Mr Earnshaw tells “a tale of his seeing it starving and houseless, and as good as dumb, in the streets of Liverpool, where he picked it up and inquired for its owner. [...] he thought it better to take it home with him at once, than run into vain expenses there: because he was determined he would not leave it as he found it.” (chapter IV)

⁶ “the young master had learned to regard his father as an oppressor rather than a friend, and Heathcliff as a usurper of his parent’s affections and his privileges” (chapter IV)

home by Mr Earnshaw. Why? Because, just like a woman, he had no social power, no status, no wealth, whether he was a bastard or simply an orphaned gypsy. It is a fact that never truly changes in the eyes of those who knew him from early childhood, before he became rich. He has only one name (no surname, no titles) and he is the embodiment of nature and instincts⁷, placed in opposition with Edgar Linton, a symbol for social authority, even though physically he is no match to Heathcliff (Edgar's power is found not in physical strength, but in words, books, documents and languages).

Heathcliff rebels against the norms of society concerning class, marriage and fortune, very much like a woman tries to find her place in a patriarchal culture. There is an ongoing battle between culture and nature, in which culture is perceived as male and nature as female. Culture is associated with the idea of heaven, with Thrushcross Grange and the Linton siblings (Edgar and Isabella), while the concept of "nature" covers hell, Wuthering Heights, Heathcliff and Catherine. As the story progresses, we see that the characters cannot survive outside the environment in which they were born and the best examples are the women: Catherine dies once she leaves behind "hell" because she cannot become part of a stifling society, while her sister-in-law (a child of heaven) cannot adapt to a lifestyle so different from the one she was used to. Heathcliff and Edgar never see the world from the other one's perspective, with the former remaining bound to nature even after earning a fortune. Nelly Dean (the "human fixture", as Lockwood calls her) remains the same throughout the novel: a survivor, the only living mother-figure and a nurturer. She is not an ideal woman, she is the daughter of a poor man, but she took care to become well-read while looking after the house and the master's children. Nelly does not have to face marriage because of her status, something which protects her from a fate similar to that of Catherine and Isabella. As for Cathy and Hareton, they prepare to step into a new stage of their lives as a happily married couple.

The relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff is anything but simple. She asked her father for a whip and got a "gypsy brat" instead. While her brother asked for a fiddle, a sign of his desire for culture, Catherine wished for power (and she got it in the form of Heathcliff). She is a far cry away from the ideal, perfect woman imagined by the Victorians and she cannot fulfil the expectations that press upon her. She is stubborn, daring and full of energy. She gets power through Heathcliff, her new whip, her strength and downfall at the same time. Together,

⁷ Catherine knows all of this and it is probably the reason why she claims that he is "more myself than I am": she has many names, but her identity is fragmented and she no longer knows who she really is.

they defy conventions as they become one single being (“a perfect androgyne”, according to Gilbert and Gubar, with no sexual awareness, like the primordial couple in the Garden of Eden). Wuthering Heights is heaven for Catherine, but hell for those who come from outside, for Lockwood, Edgar and Isabella. It is a place where she can be fierce, rebellious, free and creative, where she can act according to her own will and against the rules of religion and culture.

Once her father dies, the new head of the family and sole heir is Hindley. His marriage to Frances is one of the first phases in Catherine’s changing process because a lady enters her life and becomes something akin to a mother-figure. What could be said about her? She seems to be a perfect example of the angel in the house... one who cannot stand the sight of Heathcliff. It seems that, through her, the norms of society return for some time at Wuthering Heights (as Hindley wishes to make it suitable for a newlywed couple ready to start a family) and threatens the world in which Catherine was used to live. As Hindley starts to get accustomed to his place as *pater familias*, he becomes more aggressive. There could be two explanations: he either wishes to get his revenge on Heathcliff for stealing his father’s attention and affection or his attitude is influenced by that of his wife. He seems to reflect her change of heart: as long as she is kind to his sister and her friend, so is he, but the moment she stops caring, he tears them apart and refuses to allow Heathcliff access to culture. Frances disappears quickly from the story. What was the main role of women in the Victorian Age? To be seen, but never heard, to be good wives and provide their husbands with male heirs. And she did... she gave birth to Hareton, who became the master of Wuthering Heights at the dawn of a new century. Once her duty is fulfilled, she dies.

As mentioned before, Wuthering Heights is the space where Heathcliff and Catherine have a certain power. It is a place where they can go beyond social hierarchy and ignore the fact that he is an illegitimate child and she is a woman. Everything changes when Catherine steps into Thrushcross Grange (a violent entry, with her being injured). She starts to change and become a lady, although the process is never really completed. She wants both the freedom of girlhood and the comfort and security provided by a good marriage, but her dream is never achieved. Catherine is forced to repress her emotions and impulses and when she does not manage to control them, they are expressed violently, in a way that must have scandalised the people of the nineteenth century. She is not a submissive girl and she does not fit the standards of the Victorian society. During that time, it was expected for women to be meek and hide their

true feelings, therefore wearing a mask that hid their real self (a personality that maybe never had the opportunity to develop to its true potential). Catherine is pressured from two sides: there are the Lintons from Thrushcross Grange and her brother and sister-in-law at Wuthering Heights.

She reaches a point when she thinks she is in love with Edgar⁸ because he is handsome, young, rich, and decides to accept his marriage proposal. But her “love” is not the only reason for her answer. She is aware of the consequences she would have to face if she decided to marry Heathcliff: “I’ve no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven; and if the wicked man in there [Hindley] had not brought Heathcliff so low, I shouldn’t have thought of it. It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now” (chapter IX). According to her, if they were to get married, they would be beggars. Catherine does try to secure a future for herself, to be “the greatest woman in the neighbourhood”, but she loves Heathcliff and wants to help him escape her brother’s power. The only way she could do this is to make use of her future husband’s wealth. We see in her statements the way education and instincts fight each other. The way she was educated prompts her to think that they would be beggars in case of a potential marriage, while her instincts (the fact that she is conscious of her love for Heathcliff) drive her to find a way of getting him out of his powerless position.

Just like Catherine, Isabella also rebelled against her brother and ran away with Heathcliff. They both tried to manipulate the conditions of their marriage and did not allow their siblings to interfere. And just as Catherine could not lead a life trapped in her husband’s house (where she could no longer find freedom and independence), Isabella could not adapt to the conditions of Wuthering Heights. A child of heaven cannot live in hell. The daughter of culture pays no heed to Catherine’s warnings and decides to follow her heart, only to have her illusions shattered in the end. Isabella is an interesting character because of the way she evolved: at the beginning, she is presented as elegant and naïve, even a bit shallow, but – after facing Heathcliff’s abuse at Wuthering Heights – she has the strength to escape, to run away from him (even though she knew that she would get no help from her brother) and build a new life in London.

It was difficult for a woman to get a divorce some two hundred years ago. Divorce was granted to a woman only if she proved that, along with adultery, her husband engaged in incest,

⁸ “I love the ground under his feet, and the air over his head, and everything he touches, and every word he says. I love all his looks, and all his actions, and him entirely and altogether.” (chapter IX)

bigamy or excessive cruelty⁹. Even if she did manage to escape her abusive spouse, society frowned upon her. Isabella is similar to Anne Brontë's Helen Huntingdon from this point of view: they both leave their abusive husbands (even though the law was not on their side), risking not only their social status but also, more importantly, the possible loss of their children. It is not specifically told what happened to Isabella while in London, but we can assume that both women had to face many hardships and prejudices in order to make a living for themselves and their sons on their own. Isabella could not manifest her hatred in a violent manner because she lacked the means to do so¹⁰, but she had the courage to go against conventions and break free from the hell in which she had fallen, even if it meant being shunned by society.

One would probably expect to see in Cathy a carbon copy of her mother, but the two women are quite different from one another and even though Cathy has to pass certain trials early in life, she does not question her identity as her mother did. She is not a victim, she stands up to Heathcliff and does her best to help Hareton learn how to read and write and then take his rightful place as the new master of both Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. Although strong-willed and stubborn, Cathy is more docile than her mother, playing various roles which the first Catherine never took. Cathy is disobedient, but she remains a dutiful daughter, sharing a strong bond with her father; she is also a nurse, a teacher and a housekeeper. It seems that Emily Brontë brought in her every feature that was needed to create the seemingly perfect woman (a good wife and a good mother, true, but one who could think for herself).

Cathy was raised and protected by her father (a man of culture) and by Nelly Dean (who took the place of her mother). Only for this very reason it was to be expected that she would come to be, in some ways, different from her mother. Heathcliff represented freedom for Catherine, but oppression for Cathy. He forced her to marry Linton and leave Thrushcross Grange, but he did not succeed in breaking her spirit. While it seems strange today, marriages between first cousins were not unusual in eighteenth century England. They were seen as a way of keeping the fortune in the family, hence they were favoured. Cathy marries her cousin, but she loses everything she might have inherited after her father's death. Girls were not named

⁹“While a wife's adultery was sufficient cause to end a marriage, a woman could divorce her husband only if his adultery had been compounded by another matrimonial offense, such as cruelty or desertion,” Holmes, Sumner, and Nelson, Claudia. *Maternal Instincts: Visions of Motherhood and Sexuality in Britain, 1875-1925*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997, p 40.

¹⁰ “I surveyed the weapon inquisitively. A hideous notion struck me: how powerful I should be possessing such an instrument! I took it from his hand, and touched the blade. He [Hareton] looked astonished at the expression my face assumed during a brief second: it was not horror, it was covetousness. He snatched the pistol back, jealously; shut the knife, and returned it to its concealment.” (chapter XIII)

heirs to the family's wealth. When the head of the family passed away, the first-born son (or another close male relative) received everything¹¹. Because Edgar Linton did not leave any documents to insure his daughter's financial security, Thrushcross Grange passes after his death to Linton and eventually to Heathcliff.

Cathy attracts Hareton away from Heathcliff's influence, away from nature and towards culture. By the end of the novel, Hareton becomes the master of Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights. He marries Cathy and together they bring order to both places, erasing the distinction of hell/heaven between them. Heathcliff and Catherine fade away while a new world is created by Cathy and Hareton (a proper, civilized couple) at the dawn of a new century. Wuthering Heights is no longer "hell" in 1802. It was made the same as Thrushcross Grange, appropriate for the new masters to take their place as a newly formed family. We do not get to see what happened to Cathy and Hareton after their wedding, but it is hinted that nothing could stand in their way. As for the shadows of the past, they are left behind.

Virginia Woolf comments in *The Common Reader* that there is no "I" in *Wuthering Heights*. The idea is that, unlike her sisters, Emily Brontë drew her inspiration from a more general concept when it came to feelings. Woolf believes that, while Charlotte Brontë's characters reflect the emotions of the individual, those of her sister give voice to the entire human race, they reflect the power of human nature. Also, according to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, it is a novel of "myth making", of solving problems. What she is trying to do is give an answer to the question of origins: "it is the myth of how culture came about, and specifically of how nineteenth-century society occurred, the tale of where tea-tables, sofas, crinolines, and parsonages like the one at Haworth came from" (p 257). *Wuthering Heights* is the base on which history waits to unravel itself once the conflict between nature and culture comes to an end and a new century, when new conventions may be formed once more, is about to begin.

¹¹ We have such a situation in *Jane Eyre*, when Rochester explains that he was set to marry Bertha Mason, a rich woman, so that his brother could inherit the entire fortune of the family.

Bibliography

1. Gilbert, Sandra M. and Gubar, Susan. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.
2. Holmes, Sumner and Nelson, Claudia. *Maternal Instincts: Visions of Motherhood and Sexuality in Britain, 1875-1925*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997.
3. Homans, Margaret. *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
4. *
5. Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. The Literature network, <http://www.online-literature.com/bronte/wuthering/>, accessed on November 20th 2015.
6. Cuțitaru, Codrin Liviu, "Femei victoriene", România literară, http://www.romlit.ro/femei_victoriene, accessed on November 20th 2015.
7. Woolf, Virginia, "The Common Reader". The University of Adelaide – Library, <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91c/contents.html>, accessed on November 20th 2015.