

# Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*: A Study of the Reader's Response

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## **Abstract**

*Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights presents a true love between Catherine and Heathcliff from puritan perception. Their love, however, gets into trouble because of their cultural misunderstanding. Heathcliff is an uncultured character whereas Catherine is a cultured woman. They are spotlessly right in their own place. So, the readers show equal sympathy for both characters because they (Catherine and Heathcliff) are equally innocent in their love affairs. Both are upright in their respective attitude towards each other but both remain unfortunate in society. Their relationship is a subject of deep interest and reflection for the readers.*

**Keywords:** Puritan perception, upright, spotlessly right, innocence, readers' reflection and response

## **Introduction**

*Wuthering heights*, written in 1847, was Emily Bronte's first and only published novel. It is a classic tale of jealousy, vengefulness, and passion and it is widely regarded as a classic of English literature. The novel brings out Bronte's mastery of an extremely complex structure, acute evocation or response of place, and poetic grandeur of vision. Bronte died on December 19, 1848, at the young age of thirty. She knew nothing of the success which *Wuthering heights* was to be finally accorded. *Scientific Methods for the Humanities*, a book of research written by Willie Van Peer, Frank Hakemulder and Sonia Zyngier examines the response of the respondents in the excerpt below:

This makes open question less fit for computer analyses and it will be trickier to come to reliable conclusions. Also, you should consider that in many cases you do not want respondents to spend too much time on your questionnaire (people may have other plans after their visit to the museum). Closed questions are filled out much more quickly and more easily than open ones. But you can add one or two open questions to our questionnaire. The advantage here is that we can use these comments to check whether you have overlooked some important aspect of response. Or you may select some typical quotes from the responses to use them as illustration material in your report. Another advantage is that you have some extra control over the validity of your findings; you can use open responses

to check whether respondents interpreted the closed questions correctly. Still it is advisable, especially for beginners, to concentrate on closed questions. As Limbert and Polzella (1998) show, these may bring you faster and more reliable results, which can be revealing event when you are dealing with relatively unexplored territory". (100)

In literature, the novel genre has generated itself as a special form to reflect the comings and goings of an individual and also of the human society. Sometimes, these normal things undergo a drastic change and the novelist ascends to a level more than the normal novelist. Such a different novelist is Emily Bronte and her sole work *Wuthering Heights* is one of the unbeatable classic English fictions. The novel is interpreted according to the reader's own individual perception and judgment.

### **Bronte's Company with Nature**

Emily Bronte was always different from others. She was a strange, mysterious girl and she spent most of her time in the wild moors. She always wanted to be one with nature. She preferred the company of nature more than the human company. One could see this behavior of hers in her characters like Heathcliff and Catherine. *Wuthering Heights* is the farmhouse high up in the wild moors. The novel *Wuthering Heights* is a story of Heathcliff's revenge on the Earnshaw family and the Linton family. Heathcliff, an orphan, was brought home by the senior Earnshaw. Hindley, Earnshaw's son, did not like Heathcliff but Catherine, Earnshaw's daughter, taught and kept company with him. In course of time, Catherine was drawn towards cultured Edgar Linton, and they got married. Heathcliff left *Wuthering Heights*. Heathcliff came with a secret to wipe out his enemies Hindley and Edgar. So he eloped with Edgar's sister and they had a boy child named Linton. He ruined Hindley's life till Hindley lost all his property in gambling to Heathcliff. Heathcliff made Hareton, Hindley's son to grow up as a slave to him. Meanwhile, Catherine died after giving birth to young Catherine.

### **The Death of Revenge and Birth of Hope**

Heathcliff wanted Cathy to marry Linton, so he kidnapped her. Soon Hindley died, as did Linton and Edgar. In due course, Cathy was drawn towards Hareton. One day when Heathcliff was about to strike Cathy, Hareton came forward to defend her. Seeing this, Heathcliff was reminded of his relationship with Catherine, lost his will for revenge and died one morning. The novel ends, metaphorically, with the death of revenge and birth of hope. Such birth of hope is clearly explicated in the following conversations of the novel:

"Come in, that's right!" exclaimed the mistress, gaily, pulling a chair to the fire. Here are two people sadly in need of a third to thaw the ice between them; and you are the very one we should both of us choose. Heathcliff, I'm proud to show you, at last, somebody that dotes on you more than myself. I expect you to feel flattered. Nay, it's not Nelly; don't look at her! My poor little sister –in –law is

breaking her heart by mere contemplation of your physical and moral beauty. It lies in your own power to be Edgar's brother! No, no, Isabella, you shan't run off, she continued, arresting, with feigned playfulness, the confounded girl, who had risen indignantly. 'We were quarrelling like cats about you, Heathcliff; and I was fairly beaten in protestations of devotion and admiration: and, moreover, I was informed that if I would but have the manners to stand aside, my rival, as she will have herself to be, would shoot a shaft into your soul that would fix you forever, and send my image into eternal oblivion!" (95)

A close and constant steady study of *Wuthering Heights* will unlock many unexpected things in the novel and will prove why this novel is unique in English fiction. This novel is rich in all whatever a novel demands; even are can say, it gives more than that. *Wuthering Heights* is all imagination which is related or unrelated to life or experience. A fast reading of this work would give one the impression that this is another love story. But it is not. To bring out the quintessence of the novel, one must make a study from the author's point of view, and from the characters and the readers' view points as well. Let us talk the author's point of view. To roll some of the life pages of Emily Bronte, her childhood, behavior and personality becomes inevitable. Having an entirely different childhood, Emily was sure to have written this great work. Emily's father Mr. Patrick Bronte, a poor father, walked long and far in the moors and shunned company. He had his meals by himself in his study and did not like his children to interrupt him. He made them hardy and indifferent to dresses and eating and never let his children associate with the village children.

## **Impressions of the Author**

Emily Bronte was different from other children. She was aloof and harsh; never cared about the fashion. She felt shy to visit her friends when they invited her. It was natural for her to feel so because she had little experience with society and was brought up in seclusion. She never made complaints; neither wanted sympathy nor help. She became ill after her brother's death. She had not seen the doctor when he was sent for. She grew worse one morning and at midday asked for a doctor. But it was too late. At last she died. Such an unusual individual was Emily Bronte. From these glimpses of her life, one would think that she had put the whole of herself into the great fiction, *Wuthering Heights*. She had poured out her innermost thoughts, feelings and passions into the characters and into the novel. Emily was everywhere in minute details, descriptions and scenes in the whole novel. One cannot stop himself or herself to look at the novelist after reading *Wuthering Heights*. The characters of *Wuthering Heights* – Heathcliff, Catharine, Hareton, Hindley, and young Cathy, make one put on their shoes, walk in their way and live the life they lead. Some of the characters were part and parcel of Emily, the people she had seen, watched and observed. Of all the characters Heathcliff and Catherine have surely left impressions on the readers. These lines evoke readers' response in the novel and even make them reveal themselves as vividly as they are:

I determined to watch his movement. My heart invariably cleaved to the master's, in preference to Catherine's side: with reason I imagined, for he was kind, and

trustful, and honorable; and she –she could not be called opposite, yet she seemed to allow herself much wide latitude, that I had little faith in her principles and still less sympathy for her feelings. I wanted something to happen which might have the effect of freeing both Wuthering Heights and the Grange of Mr.Heatcliff quietly; leaving us as we had prior to his advent. His visits were a continual nightmare to me; and, I suspected, to my master also. His abode at the Heights was oppression past explaining. I felt the god had forsaken the stray sheep there to its own wicked wanderings, and an evil beast prowled between it and the fold, waiting his time to spring and destroy(97)

Heathcliff, being an orphan, was suddenly thrust into the Earnshaw family. Everything was new, including the affection of Catherine. In other words, he found himself in Catherine. When he was sure that he had attained the meaning of life in Catherine, she betrayed him and preferred Edger Linton. Heathcliff never expected such negligence. It made him frustrated and violent. A probe into the character of Heathcliff may reveal that he was angry not so much with Catherine as with her age. Chris Barker comments that: "a problem is never 'one thing' but a clustering of questions and issues"(7). It was quite normal for a girl like Catherine to oscillate between the cultured Edgar and the uncultured Heathcliff. Only at this point, Catherine descended one step from Heathcliff. What harm had Heathcliff done? What crime did he commit? Nothing but he had seen his 'self' in Catherine. Without her, he was nothing. Catherine had taken, or say, pulled away the life out of Heathcliff. And Catherine's death had shattered him into pieces. At one stage, he was torn between the real world and the spirit of Catherine. Once Catherine was his strength; she became his weakness later. Whatever it was or however he behaved, Heathcliff had a strong impact on the readers and that is for sure.

## Individual Perception

A reader may ask: what kind of novel is *Wuthering Heights*? And how will the reader take the novel? The answer depends on individual thoughts and feelings. The novel *Wuthering Heights*' response depends on how one approaches it. If one approaches *Wuthering Heights* as a tragedy, it is a tragedy or it becomes a revenge story if it is approached that way. A little background knowledge of the novelist, Emily Bronte and a little insight of the characters will aid a reader to get experienced along with the novel. Somerset Maugham's words in *The World's Ten Greatest Novels* are enough to describe *Wuthering Heights*. Maugham elucidates Emily Bronte's insight into the following lines: "*Wuthering Heights* is not a book to talk about; it is a book to read. It is easy to find fault with it; it is very imperfect; and yet it has what few novelists can give you, power. I do not know a novel in which the pain, the ecstasy, the ruthlessness, and the obsessiveness of love have been so wonderfully described (137)". The following lines in *Wuthering Heights*, comparable with what of Maugham wrote in *The World's Ten Greatest Novels*, point an eye witnessed picture:

"There's tigress!" exclaimed Mrs. Linton, setting her free, and shaking her hand with pain. Begone, for God's sake, and hide your viewed face! How foolish to reveal those talons to him. Can't you fancy the conclusions he'll draw? Look,

{90}

Heathcliff! They are instruments that will do execution – you must beware of your eyes."(96)

## Conclusion

To sum up, the company becomes strength for both characters for sometime in the beginning but later the same company becomes weak because of the gap and difference arising from their cultural background. So Catherine's love for Heathcliff ends as a failure and her love for Edgar Linton is culturally justified. That's why readers individually feel pity for show and sympathy towards the love between Catherine and Heathcliff. Bronte's writing skill is based on full-fledged or holistic imagination which compels readers to pass their judgment on both characters in the novel with equal justice and objectivity.

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