

Department of English

B.A : IV SEMISTER

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Unit 2 : WUTHERING HEIGHTS

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Wuthering Heights is not just a sentimental romance novel. It is a presentation of life, an essay on love, a glimpse at relationships, a social novel about class structure in society and gender inequality.

Class Conflict in Wuthering Heights

Class division has been there since the beginning of civilization. In all phases of history there has been a conflict between two classes of society. In the ancient times, the conflict was between free citizens and slaves. In the feudal society of the middle ages, it was between the feudal lords and the serfs. Later on, it was between the aristocrats and the commoners.

Social class in the Victorian Era was not solely dependent on the financial status of an individual. The source of income of an individual and his birth played a major role in determining his/her position in society. And, significantly, most people accepted their place in the hierarchy. In addition to money, manners, speech, clothing, education, and values revealed a person's class. The three main classes were the elite class, the middle class, and the working class. Further divisions existed within these three class distinctions.

Wuthering Heights demonstrate the nature of this class-structured society. The Lintons are the most elite family in the novel, and Thrushcross Grange though a superior property to Wuthering Heights, yet are not members of the upperclass of society.

The two houses in the novel portray the difference between them of class and culture. The Earnshaw family can be called yeoman—a farming family, closer to land and to agriculture. Lintons—a little more polished and refined—have created a distance between themselves and the rural economy. The Grange stands in the park and its security is ensured by the boundary wall as a frontier between civilization and the wild nature. They keep security dogs as the bourgeois do to protect their wealth. *Wuthering Height* is situated on the moor. It has primitive roughness of a peasant life style. The Grange has all civilized luxuries of an aristocratic class opposed to the simplicity of domestic affair of *Wuthering Heights*. It is here Catherine is taken in and Heathcliff turned away. “Dogs are used to thwart the advance of Catherine and Heathcliff as the bourgeois way of protecting ill gotten wealth” (Terry Eagleton). The ideology that Grange shows is obviously a dominant ideology which transforms Catherine physically and psychologically.

Considerations of class status often crucially inform the characters’ motivations in *Wuthering Heights*. Catherine’s decision to marry Edgar so that she will be “the greatest woman of the neighborhood” is only the most obvious example. The Lintons are relatively firm in their gentry status but nonetheless take great pains to prove this status through their behaviors. The Earnshaws, on the other hand, rest on much shakier ground socially. They do not have a carriage, they have less land, and their house, as Lockwood remarks with great puzzlement, resembles that of a “homely, northern farmer” and not that of a gentleman. The shifting nature of social status is demonstrated most strikingly in Heathcliff’s trajectory from homeless waif to young gentleman-by-adoption to common laborer to gentleman again (although the status-conscious Lockwood remarks that Heathcliff is only a gentleman in “dress and manners”).

Heathcliff’s emotional turmoil is due in part to his ambiguous class status. He begins life as a lower-class orphan, but is raised to the status of a gentleman’s son when Mr. Earnshaw adopts him. He suffers another reversal in status when Hindley forces him to work as a servant in the very same household where he once enjoyed higher status. The other characters, including the Lintons and, to an extent, Catherine—all upper-class themselves—prove complicit in this obliteration of Heathcliff’s hopes. Inevitably, the unbridgeable gap in Catherine’s and Heathcliff’s social positions renders their fervent romance unrealizable on any practical level.

When Heathcliff returns, having money is not enough for Edgar to consider him a part of acceptable society. Heathcliff uses his role as the outcast to encourage

Isabella's infatuation. The feelings that both Catherine and Isabella have for Heathcliff, the common laborer, cause them to lose favor with their brothers. Hindley and Edgar cannot accept the choices their sisters make and therefore, withdraw their love. When a woman betrays her class, she is betraying her family and her class — both unacceptable actions.

Although Heathcliff constantly professes his love for Catherine, he has no qualms in attempting to ruin her daughter's life. He views an ambiguous world as black and white: a world of haves and have-nots. And for too long, he had been the outsider. That is why he is determined to take everything away from those at Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange as they did not accept him. For Heathcliff, revenge is a more powerful emotion than love. Heathcliff describes to Nelly his control over Hareton and Linton's social class. Heathcliff explains how he has taught Hareton, who was born a gentleman, the mannerism of the lower class. Whereas he plans to bring Linton, his son, to a higher class by forcing a marriage with young Catherine. Heathcliff manipulates the social standings of Hareton and Linton as part of his plans to challenge the class divide of which he had been a victim. Heathcliff resents the poor treatment he received as an orphan without social connections and asserts the power of social class.

The Conflict between Nature and Culture

In *Wuthering Heights*, Brontë constantly plays nature and culture against each other. Nature is represented by the Earnshaw family, by Catherine and Heathcliff in particular. These characters are governed by their passions, not by reflection or ideals of civility. Correspondingly, the house where they live—Wuthering Heights—comes to symbolize a similar wildness. On the other hand, Thrushcross Grange and the Linton family represent culture, refinement, convention, and cultivation. When, in Chapter VI, Catherine is bitten by the Lintons' dog and brought into Thrushcross Grange, the two sides are brought onto the collision course that structures the majority of the novel's plot. At the time of that first meeting between the Linton and Earnshaw households, chaos had already begun to erupt at *Wuthering Heights*, where Hindley's cruelty and injustice reign, whereas all seems to be fine and peaceful at Thrushcross Grange. However, the influence of

Wuthering Heights soon proves overpowering, and the inhabitants of Thrushcross Grange are drawn into Catherine, Hindley, and Heathcliff's drama. Thus the reader almost may interpret Wuthering Heights's impact on the Linton family as an allegory for the corruption of culture by nature, creating a curious reversal of the more traditional story of the corruption of nature by culture. However, Brontë tells her story in such a way as to prevent our interest and sympathy from straying too far from the wilder characters, and often portrays the more civilized characters as despicably weak and silly. This method of characterization prevents the novel from flattening themes, motifs, and symbols out into a simple privileging of culture over nature, or vice versa. Thus in the end the reader must acknowledge that the novel is no mere allegory

The Narrative Structure

Brontë's novel adopts the multi-narrative voice which opens a forum for multiple perspectives and demonstrates through this narrative device the possibility of alternative interpretations of Heathcliff's character. If the reader were to rely on the perspective of Lockwood or Nelly alone, then Heathcliff would only be seen in a negative light. In *Wuthering Height*, Brontë outlines that man's refusal to overlook his prejudices is what augments his inability to discern what lies beyond his limitations. Nelly and Lockwood present the limited eye, whereby the reader must actively reshape their interpretation of Heathcliff through an alternative lens

Brontë appears to present objective observers, in an attempt to allow the story to speak for itself. Objective observations by outsiders would presumably not be tainted by any direct involvement; unfortunately, a closer examination of these two seemingly objective narrators reveals their bias.

Lockwood and Nelly serve as the obvious narrators. Lockwood's narrative introduces to the story when most of the action is already complete. Although the main story is being told in flashback, Lockwood's interaction with Heathcliff and the others at *Wuthering Heights* immediately displaces his objectivity. What he records in his diary is not just what he is being told by Nelly but his memories and interpretation of Nelly's tale. Likewise, Nelly's narrative directly involves the reader and engages them in the action. While reporting the past, she is able to foreshadow future events, which builds suspense, thereby engaging readers interest . But her

involvement is problematic as she is biased in her actions: sometimes choosing Edgar over Heathcliff (and vice versa), and at times working with Cathy while at other times betraying Cathy's confidence. Nonetheless, she is quite an engaging storyteller.

The strange, deliberately confusing opening chapters of *Wuthering Heights* serve as Brontë's introduction to the world of the novel and to the complex relationships among the characters, as well as to the peculiar style of narration through which the story will be told. One of the most important aspects of the novel is its second- and third-hand manner of narration. Nothing is ever related simply from the perspective of a single participant. Instead, the story is told through entries in Lockwood's diary, but Lockwood does not participate in the events he records. The vast majority of the novel represents Lockwood's written recollections of what he has learned from the testaments of others, whether he is transcribing what he recalls of Catherine's diary entry or recording his conversations with Nelly Dean. Because of the distance that this imposes between the reader and the story itself, it is extremely important to remember that nothing in the book is written from the perspective of an unbiased narrator, and it is often necessary to read between the lines in order to understand events. The reader can immediately question Lockwood's reliability as a conveyer of facts. A vain and somewhat shallow man, he frequently makes amusing mistakes—he assumes, for instance, that Heathcliff is a gentleman with a house full of servants, even though it is apparent to the reader that Heathcliff is a rough and cruel man with a house full of dogs. Nelly Dean is also biased as she frequently glosses over her own role in the story's developments, particularly when she has behaved badly. Later in the novel, she describes how she took the young Linton to live with his cruel father after the death of his mother. She lies to the boy on the journey, telling him that his father is a kind man, and, after his horrible meeting with Heathcliff, she tries to sneak out when he is not paying attention. He notices her and begs her not to leave him with Heathcliff. She ignores his entreaties, however, and tells Lockwood that she simply had "no excuse for lingering longer." Nelly is generally a dependable source of information, but moments such as this one—and there are many—remind the reader that the story is told by a fallible human being.

QUESTIONS :

1. *Wuthering Heights* challenges strict Victorian ideals regarding social classes, gender inequality, morality and religious hypocrisy. Discuss

2. *Wuthering Heights* is neither moral nor immoral but amoral. Discuss

3. How is Heathcliff 'othered' in the novel?

4. Discuss the gothic traits present in the novel.