

THE  
CONNELL GUIDE  
TO EMILY BRONTË'S



WUTHERING  
HEIGHTS

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HELENA BONHAM CARTER

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE  
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by *Graham Bradshaw*

*The  
Connell Guide  
to  
Emily Brontë's*

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# Wuthering Heights

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Graham Bradshaw*

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# Introduction

*Wuthering Heights* is one of the most written-about novels in the English language. Famous for the dark and passionate world Emily Brontë creates, and for the doomed relationship between Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff, it is a story which has almost become synonymous with romance, not just for Hollywood, chick lit writers and advertisers but for many who have read it and many more who haven't. Countless stories, films, television adaptations and magazine articles owe their origins or inspiration to Brontë's extraordinary story of love and death in the Yorkshire moors. Catherine's desperate avowal – "Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff" – has been described as the most romantic sentence in fiction.

For all its later enormous influence and reputation, the novel had relatively little impact in the first 50 years or so after publication. It was easily eclipsed in fame and critical renown by *Jane Eyre*, the more straightforwardly romantic novel written by Emily's sister, Charlotte, and the runaway bestseller of 1847. It wasn't until the early 20th century that critical opinion began to change, and that change owed a great deal to the formidable critic Mrs Humphry Ward, who lavished *Wuthering Heights* with praise in her introduction to the Haworth edition of the works of the Brontë sisters. Ward thought Emily Brontë a

greater writer than her sister – a view later reinforced by the critic David Cecil in what is undoubtedly the most powerful essay of his *Early Victorian Novelists* (1934). Critical momentum steadily grew after this and in recent years the novel has been all but overwhelmed in a flood of criticism of all kinds, with Marxists, feminists and psychoanalysts all finding plenty of grist for their particular mills.

So what is *Wuthering Heights* really about? Is it the Great Romantic Novel which so many readers, critics and film-makers assume it to be? What are we meant to make of Heathcliff, the lonely, violent man at the heart of Brontë's story? Why is *Wuthering Heights* open to so many different interpretations, as Frank Kermode believes it is (though he sees this as a sign of its greatness)? In this book I will explore these questions and attempt to show why Emily Brontë's novel remains such a vivid, subtle and resonant work more than 150 years after it was first published.

## A summary of the plot

The novel begins in 1801. Mr Lockwood, a gentleman from the south of England – and one of the two main narrators – has rented a house in Yorkshire called Thrushcross Grange. Soon after his arrival he visits his landlord, Mr Heathcliff, who lives in a remote moorland farmhouse called

Wuthering Heights, and despite an unfriendly reception ends up staying the night. Lockwood has a nightmare followed by something much more disturbing: the appearance at the window of a sobbing child; she announces herself as Catherine Linton who has been “a waif for twenty years”. The child terrifies Lockwood and – “terror made me cruel” – he rubs her wrist on the broken glass. Lockwood’s screams bring Heathcliff, who flies into a monstrous rage on learning of the nightmare (if that is what it is) and is later overheard by Lockwood beseeching Catherine at the open window to come to him. Lockwood returns exhausted to Thrushcross Grange where he is tended by the housekeeper, Nelly Dean.

Nelly is persuaded to amuse him by telling him the story of the Earnshaws, the Lintons and the Heathcliffs. Her tale begins 30 years earlier, in the summer of 1771. (As C. P. Sanger famously showed, the novel’s chronology is very carefully worked out.) Mr Earnshaw, the owner of the Heights, leaves to visit Liverpool (he says) and promises to bring back presents for his two children, a fiddle for Hindley and a whip for Catherine. In fact, what he brings back is “a dirty, ragged, black-haired child”, found abandoned (he says) in the streets of the city. He is christened “Heathcliff” which serves him for both Christian name and surname.

The arrival of Heathcliff has a disastrous effect.

Hindley, barely 14, is supplanted in his father’s affections by the mysterious foundling. At the same time Heathcliff develops a passionate natural kinship with Catherine, then six. Because of the discord Hindley is sent away to college, but returns three years later – when Mr Earnshaw dies – having married a southern girl named Frances. As the new master of the Heights, he forces Heathcliff to become a servant, and Heathcliff is regularly beaten by Hindley and by the “vinegar-faced” old retainer, Joseph.

A few months later Heathcliff and Catherine go to Thrushcross Grange to spy on the Linton family who live there. They are spotted, and when they try to escape Catherine is viciously mauled by a dog. She is brought inside the Grange to have her injuries tended; Heathcliff is sent home. When she eventually returns to the Heights, dressed in new clothes, she looks and acts like a lady and laughs at Heathcliff’s unkempt appearance. Degraded by Hindley and deeply hurt by Catherine’s growing affection for Edgar Linton, Heathcliff runs away.

By the time he returns, in September 1783, Hindley’s wife Frances has died (after giving birth to a son, Hareton) and Catherine has been married to Edgar for five months. Her love for Edgar, she tells Nelly, is the kind of love that is bound to change, “like the foliage in the woods”, while the love she feels for Heathcliff “resembles the eternal rocks beneath”.

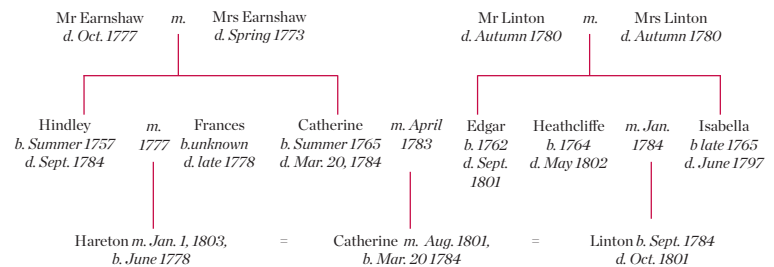
During his period away Heathcliff has become rich, though it is never clear how, educated and self-confident – he now has a “half-civilised ferocity”. Re-establishing contact with Catherine, he asserts his claims over her and the resulting disruption of the Thrushcross Grange household and strain on Catherine leads to her death, aged only 19 (and after giving birth to a daughter, Catherine), in March 1784. Meanwhile, Isabella Linton, Edgar’s sister, has become infatuated with Heathcliff and Heathcliff – determined to take revenge not just on Hindley but on the Linton family too – makes her his wife in a runaway marriage as part of a plan to get possession of Thrushcross Grange.

The rest of the novel revolves around Heathcliff’s plan for revenge. He succeeds in marrying his own weak and effeminate son, Linton, to the younger Catherine in August 1801. (Linton is the product of his marriage to Isabella, before, bruised and miserable after her sadistic treatment, she runs away from him.) But Linton is already dying and survives for less than two months after the marriage. As a result Heathcliff now manages to get all the Linton property into his hands, Edgar Linton also having died.\* By now Heathcliff has also succeeded in destroying Hindley, who has drunk himself to death in September 1884, though

\*In a carefully researched essay in 1926, C.P. Sanger argues that in fact Heathcliff’s legal title to Thrushcross Grange is very dubious. Sanger’s essay can still be read on the web.

John Sutherland argues in his essay, “Is Heathcliff a murderer?”, that Heathcliff could have prevented the death but didn’t, in effect killing him. As for Hareton, Hindley’s son – Heathcliff tries to degrade him into an uncouth and illiterate servant.

Heathcliff’s obsession, however, has remained the dead Catherine, with whom he steadfastly believes he will be reunited. We have now come back to the point where the novel opens, and when Lockwood sees Catherine at the window, Heathcliff believes she has returned to him at last. He gives up his plans for revenge, ceases to eat and dies in what David Daiches calls “an ecstasy of expectation of reunion with Catherine”. Meanwhile, the young Catherine softens and educates Hareton Earnshaw until he becomes civilised enough to marry her. So the wheel has come full circle: the novel ends, as it begins, with a Catherine Earnshaw.



# What is *Wuthering Heights* about?

One of the ways in which *Wuthering Heights* is unforgettable is in its quite extraordinary sense of place, and of the bleak, hauntingly alien and austere beauty of the Yorkshire moors. The sense of place is no less remarkable in many of Thomas Hardy's novels, notably *The Return of the Native*, which begins with a long and awesome description



## SOCIETY AND THE NOVEL

Jane Austen's "un-interest in the great world, often commented on, is as nothing to Emily Brontë's", says Michael Black. "You are perfectly aware with Jane Austen that you are in the Bath, Hampshire, or London she knew, at the time she knew it." It is a social world she describes, like Flaubert's Normandy, Dickens's London or Tolstoy's St Petersburg. The people of *Wuthering*

*Heights* and Thrushcross Grange are not like this at all: they "belong to the human race and all time"; the moors represent something primeval and eternal.

Yet *Wuthering Heights* is also, up to a point, a historical novel. In it Emily Brontë was imagining and reconstructing the world in which her parents had grown up – a world already largely lost. In this respect *Wuthering Heights* – the great "Romantic novel" – could profitably be compared with George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Like *Middlemarch*, published in the early 1870s but set four

of Egdon Heath. After that the Heath is felt as a constant, dread presence that blights or crushes the lives of those who have to live there. So Hardy's doomed Clym Yeobright is described as "permeated with the heath's scenes, with its substance, with its odours":

*He might be said to be its product... with its appearance all the first images of his memory were mingled; his estimate of life had been*

decades earlier in the period of the 1832 Reform Bill, *Wuthering Heights* is about "provincial" life that spans the three decades from 1771 to 1802. Of course it isn't a "panoramic" novel like *Middlemarch*. There aren't many characters, and its action all takes place within an area of about 16 square miles. But it shows, like *Middlemarch*, what it was like to *live through* a period of immense social change. Brontë was writing, like George Eliot, as an extraordinarily intelligent social historian.

Unlike Eliot, she concentrates in a narrow, very intense way on the

changes that took place in a remote area in the West Riding of Yorkshire, and above all in that area's two main houses – the ancient Wuthering Heights, built in 1500 when the ancient Earnshaws were the leading family, and the new or modern Thrushcross Grange where the live. This contrast "Ancient" and "Modern" as Q. D. Leavis put it... shows why – in Emily Brontë's view, like Jane Austen's when she contemplates modern "improvements" in *Mansfield Park* – Evolution shouldn't be confused with Progress.

