

EMILY BRONTË

(1818 - 1848)

(Full name Emily Jane Brontë) English novelist and poet.

Brontë is considered one of the most important yet elusive figures in nineteenth-century English literature. Although she led a brief and circumscribed life, spent in relative isolation in a parsonage on the Yorkshire moors, she left behind a literary legacy that includes some of the most passionate and inspired writing in Victorian literature. Today, Brontë's poems are well regarded by critics, but they receive little attention, and her overall reputation rests primarily on her only novel, *Wuthering Heights* (1847). While Brontë incorporated into that work the horror and mystery of a Gothic novel, the remote setting and passionate characters of a Romantic novel, and the social criticism of a Victorian novel, she transformed all of these traditions. In this story of extraordinary love and revenge, Brontë demonstrated the conflict between elemental passions and civilized society, resulting in a compelling work that has been elevated to the status of a literary classic. At the same time, Brontë's writings have raised many questions about their author's intent. Unable to reach a consensus concerning the ultimate meaning of her works and reluctant to assign them a definitive place in the English literary

tradition, critics continue to regard Brontë as a fascinating enigma in English letters.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Although Brontë's life was outwardly uneventful, the unusual circumstances of her upbringing have prompted considerable scrutiny. One of six children born to Maria Branwell Brontë and the Reverend Patrick Brontë, she was raised in the parsonage at Haworth by her father and maternal aunt following her mother's death in 1821. In 1825 she was sent to the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge, but returned to Haworth when her sisters Maria and Elizabeth became ill at the institution and died. A significant event in Brontë's creative life occurred in 1826 when Patrick Brontë bought a set of wooden toy soldiers for his children. The toys opened up a rich fantasy world for Emily and her siblings Charlotte, Branwell, and Anne: Charlotte and Branwell created an imaginary African land called Angria, for which they invented characters, scenes, stories, and poems, and Emily and Anne later conceived a romantic legend centered upon the imaginary Pacific Ocean island of Gondal. The realm of Gondal became a lifelong interest for Brontë and, according to many scholars, a major imaginative

source for her writings. In addition to composing prose works (now lost) concerning the history of Gondal, she wrote numerous poems that were evidently directly inspired by Gondal-related themes, characters, and situations. While Brontë was intellectually precocious and began writing poetry at an early age, she failed to establish social contacts outside of her family. She briefly attended a school in East Yorkshire in 1835 and worked as an assistant teacher at the Law Hill School near Halifax in about 1838, but these excursions from home were unsuccessful, ending in Brontë's early return to Haworth. She stayed at the parsonage, continuing to write poetry and attending to household duties, until 1842, when she and Charlotte, hoping to acquire the language skills needed to establish a school of their own, took positions at a school in Brussels. Her aunt's death later that year, however, forced Brontë to return to Haworth, where she resided for the rest of her life.

In 1845, Charlotte discovered one of Emily's private poetry notebooks. At Charlotte's urging Emily reluctantly agreed to publish some of her poems in a volume that also included writings by her sisters. *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell*, reflecting the masculine pseudonyms adopted by Charlotte, Emily, and Anne, respectively, was published in May 1846. While only two copies of the book were sold, at least one commentator, Sydney Dobell, praised Emily's poems, singling her out in the *Athenaeum* as a promising writer and the best poet among the "Bell" family. Meanwhile, Brontë had been working on *Wuthering Heights*, which was published in 1847 in an edition that also included Anne's first novel, *Agnes Grey*. Brontë's masterpiece was poorly received by contemporary critics who, repelled by the vivid portrayal of malice and brutality in the book, objected to the "degrading" nature of her subject. Brontë worked on revising her poetry after publishing *Wuthering Heights*, but her efforts were soon interrupted. Branwell Brontë died in September 1848, and Emily's health began to decline shortly afterwards. In accordance with what Charlotte described as her sister's strong-willed and inflexible nature, Brontë apparently refused medical attention and died of tuberculosis in December 1848.

MAJOR WORKS

Although Brontë is more distinguished as a novelist than as a poet, scholars regard her

poetry as a significant part of her oeuvre. In particular, lacking first-hand information concerning her life and opinions, commentators have looked to the poems as a source of insight into Brontë's personality, philosophy, and imagination. Critics have attempted to reconstruct a coherent Gondal "epic" from Brontë's poems and journal entries. In addition to identifying Gondal's queen, commonly referred to as Augusta Geraldine Almeda, and her lover Julius Brenzaida as key characters in the Gondal story, scholars have underscored the presence of wars, assassination, treachery, and infanticide in Brontë's fantasy realm. Critics have consequently noted many similarities between the passionate characters and violent motifs of Gondal and *Wuthering Heights*, and today a generous body of criticism exists supporting the contention that the Gondal poems served as a creative forerunner of the novel.

In *Wuthering Heights*, Brontë chronicles the attachment between Heathcliff, a rough orphan taken in by the Earnshaw family of Wuthering Heights, and the family's daughter, Catherine. The two characters are joined by a spiritual bond of preternatural strength, yet Catherine elects to marry her more refined neighbor, Edgar Linton of Thrushcross Grange; ultimately, this decision leads to Catherine's madness and death and prompts Heathcliff to take revenge upon both the Lintons and the Earnshaws. Heathcliff eventually dies, consoled by the thought of uniting with Catherine's spirit, and the novel ends with the suggestion that Hareton Earnshaw, the last descendant of the Earnshaw family, will marry Catherine's daughter, Catherine Linton, and abandon Wuthering Heights for Thrushcross Grange.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Initially, critics failed to appreciate Brontë's literary significance. While commentators acknowledged the emotional power of *Wuthering Heights*, they also rejected the malignant and coarse side of life that it depicted. Charlotte Brontë responded to this latter objection in 1850, defending the rough language and manners in her sister's novel as realistic. At the same time, however, she acknowledged the dark vision of life in the book, which she attributed to Emily's reclusive habits. This focus on Brontë's aloofness, combined with the mystical aspects of her poetry and the supernatural overtones of *Wuthering Heights*, fostered an image of the

writer as a reclusive mystic that dominated Brontë criticism into the twentieth century. During that century, however, a number of modern studies brought Brontë's craftsmanship to light. Recognition of her artistry increased dramatically as scholars discovered the sophistication and complexity of her images, characterizations, themes, and techniques in *Wuthering Heights*. Interest in her poetry has also grown, primarily due to investigations into its Gondal background, so that today Brontë is the focus of considerable scholarly attention as both a novelist and poet.

Many critics have noted the Gothic elements in Brontë's novel, particularly the spooky architecture of *Wuthering Heights*, the characterization of Heathcliff as a dark, brooding hero, and ghostly wanderings on the moors. Syndy McMillen Conger wrote that *Wuthering Heights* arouses emotions "central to the Gothic experience: melancholy, desire, and terror." Commentators observe that Brontë heightened her story as well with fierce animal imagery and scenes of raw violence. Dream motifs figure prominently in *Wuthering Heights*, and critics also stress the importance of windows as symbolic vehicles for spiritual entrance and escape in the novel. While the Gothic tradition influenced Brontë, she also deviated from that tradition in significant ways, notably in her characterization of Catherine Earnshaw. The typical Gothic heroine is petite, naïve, and morally virtuous, but Catherine, as Conger wrote, is "complicated, analytical, and uninhibited." The subject of wide-ranging critical debate for generations, *Wuthering Heights* continues to defy categorization and endures as a beloved literary classic.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell [as Ellis Bell, with Currer and Acton Bell (pseudonyms of Charlotte and Anne Brontë)] (poems) 1846

**Wuthering Heights* [as Ellis Bell] (novel) 1847

†*Life and Works of the Sisters Brontë*. 7 vols. [with Charlotte and Anne] (novels and poetry) 1899-1903

The Shakespeare Head Brontë. 19 vols. (novels, poetry, and letters) 1931-38

Gondal Poems (poetry) 1938

The Complete Poems of Emily Jane Brontë (poetry) 1941

* This edition of *Wuthering Heights* was published with Anne Brontë's novel *Agnes Grey*.

† This work includes letters written by Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë.

PRIMARY SOURCES

EMILY BRONTË (NOVEL DATE 1847)

SOURCE: Brontë, Emily. "Chapter 1." In *Wuthering Heights*. 1847. Reprint, pp. 1-6. New York: Bantam Dell, 2003.

The following excerpt comprises Chapter One of Wuthering Heights, which was first published in 1847.

1801—I have just returned from a visit to my landlord—the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with. This is certainly a beautiful country! In all England, I do not believe that I could have fixed on a situation so completely removed from the stir of society. A perfect misanthropist's Heaven: and Mr. Heathcliff and I are such a suitable pair to divide the desolation between us. A capital fellow! He little imagined how my heart warmed towards him when I beheld his black eyes withdraw so suspiciously under their brows, as I rode up, and when his fingers sheltered themselves, with a jealous resolution, still further in his waistcoat, as I announced my name.

'Mr. Heathcliff?' I said.

A nod was the answer.

'Mr. Lockwood, your new tenant, sir. I do myself the honour of calling as soon as possible after my arrival, to express the hope that I have not inconvenienced you by my perseverance in soliciting the occupation of Thrushcross Grange: I heard yesterday you had had some thoughts—'

'Thrushcross Grange is my own, sir,' he interrupted, wincing. 'I should not allow any one to inconvenience me, if I could hinder it—walk in!'

The 'walk in' was uttered with closed teeth, and expressed the sentiment, 'Go to the Deuce': even the gate over which he leant manifested no sympathizing movement to the words; and I think that circumstance determined me to accept the invitation: I felt interested in a man who seemed more exaggeratedly reserved than myself.

When he saw my horse's breast fairly pushing the barrier, he did pull out his hand to unchain it, and then suddenly preceded me up the causeway, calling, as we entered the court,—

'Joseph, take Mr. Lockwood's horse; and bring up some wine.'

'Here we have the whole establishment of domestics, I suppose,' was the reflection, suggested by this compound order. 'No wonder the grass grows up between the flags, and cattle are the only hedge-cutters.'

Joseph was an elderly, nay, an old man: very old, perhaps, though hale and sinewy.

'The Lord help us!' he soliloquised in an undertone of peevish displeasure, while relieving me of my horse: looking, meantime, in my face so sourly that I charitably conjectured he must have need of divine aid to digest his dinner, and his pious ejaculation had no reference to my unexpected advent.

Wuthering Heights is the name of Mr. Heathcliff's dwelling. 'Wuthering' being a significant provincial adjective, descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in stormy weather. Pure, bracing ventilation they must have up there at all times, indeed: one may guess the power of the north wind blowing over the edge, by the excessive slant of a few stunted firs at the end of the house; and by a range of gaunt thorns all stretching their limbs one way, as if craving alms of the sun. Happily, the architect had foresight to build it strong: the narrow windows are deeply set in the wall, and the corners defended with large jutting stones.

Before passing the threshold, I paused to admire a quantity of grotesque carving lavished over the front, and especially about the principal door; above which, among a wilderness of crumbling griffins and shameless little boys, I detected the date '1500,' and the name 'Hareton Earnshaw.' I would have made a few comments, and requested a short history of the place from the surly owner; but his attitude at the door appeared to demand my speedy entrance, or complete departure, and I had no desire to aggravate his impatience previous to inspecting the penetralium.

One step brought us into the family sitting-room, without any introductory lobby or passage: they call it here 'the house' preeminently. It includes kitchen and parlour, generally; but I believe at Wuthering Heights the kitchen is forced to retreat altogether into another quarter:

at least I distinguished a chatter of tongues, and a clatter of culinary utensils, deep within; and I observed no signs of roasting, boiling, or baking, about the huge fire-place; nor any glitter of copper saucepans and tin cullenders on the walls. One end, indeed, reflected splendidly both light and heat from ranks of immense pewter dishes, interspersed with silver jugs and tankards, towering row after row, on a vast oak dresser, to the very roof. The latter had never been underdrawn: its entire anatomy lay bare to an inquiring eye, except where a frame of wood laden with oatcakes and clusters of legs of beef, mutton, and ham, concealed it. Above the chimney were sundry villanous old guns, and a couple of horse-pistols: and, by way of ornament, three gaudily painted canisters disposed along its ledge. The floor was of smooth, white stone; the chairs, high-backed, primitive structures, painted green: one or two heavy black ones lurking in the shade. In an arch under the dresser, reposed a huge, liver-coloured bitch pointer, surrounded by a swarm of squealing puppies; and other dogs haunted other recesses.

The apartment and furniture would have been nothing extraordinary as belonging to a homely, northern farmer, with a stubborn countenance, and stalwart limbs set out to advantage in knee-breeches and gaiters. Such an individual seated in his armchair, his mug of ale frothing on the round table before him, is to be seen in any circuit of five or six miles among these hills, if you go at the right time after dinner. But Mr. Heathcliff forms a singular contrast to his abode and style of living. He is a dark-skinned gipsy in aspect, in dress and manners a gentleman: that is, as much a gentleman as many a country squire: rather slovenly, perhaps, yet not looking amiss with his negligence, because he has an erect and handsome figure; and rather morose. Possibly, some people might suspect him of a degree of underbred pride; I have a sympathetic chord within that tells me it is nothing of the sort: I know by instinct, his reserve springs from an aversion to showy displays of feeling—to manifestations of mutual kindness. He'll love and hate equally under cover, and esteem it a species of impertinence to be loved or hated again. No. I'm running on too fast: I bestow my own attributes over liberally on him. Mr. Heathcliff may have entirely dissimilar reasons for keeping his hand out of the way when he meets a would-be acquaintance, to those which actuate me. Let me hope my constitution is almost peculiar: my dear mother used

to say I should never have a comfortable home; and only last summer I proved myself perfectly unworthy of one.

While enjoying a month of fine weather at the seacoast, I was thrown into the company of a most fascinating creature: a real goddess in my eyes, as long as she took no notice of me. I 'never told my love' vocally; still, if looks have language, the merest idiot might have guessed I was over head and ears: she understood me at last, and looked a return—the sweetest of all imaginable looks. And what did I do? I confess it with shame—shrunk icily into myself, like a snail; at every glance retired colder and farther; till finally the poor innocent was led to doubt her own senses, and, overwhelmed with confusion at her supposed mistake, persuaded her mamma to decamp.

By this curious turn of disposition I have gained the reputation of deliberate heartlessness; how undeserved, I alone can appreciate.

I took a seat at the end of the hearthstone opposite that towards which my landlord advanced, and filled up an interval of silence by attempting to caress the canine mother, who had left her nursery, and was sneaking wolfishly to the back of my legs, her lip curled up, and her white teeth watering for a snatch.

My caress provoked a long, guttural gnarl.

'You'd better let the dog alone,' growled Mr. Heathcliff in unison, checking fiercer demonstrations with a punch of his foot. 'She's not accustomed to be spoiled—not kept for a pet.'

Then, striding to a side door, he shouted again—'Joseph!'

Joseph mumbled indistinctly in the depths of the cellar, but gave no intimation of ascending; so his master dived down to him, leaving me *vis-à-vis* the ruffianly bitch and a pair of grim shaggy sheep-dogs, who shared with her a jealous guardianship over all my movements.

Not anxious to come in contact with their fangs, I sat still; but, imagining they would scarcely understand tacit insults, I unfortunately indulged in winking and making faces at the trio, and some turn of my physiognomy so irritated madam, that she suddenly broke into a fury, and leapt on my knees. I flung her back, and hastened to interpose the table between us. This proceeding roused the whole hive. Half-a-dozen four-footed fiends, of various sizes and ages, issued from hidden dens to the common centre. I felt my heels and coat-laps peculiar

subjects of assault; and, parrying off the larger combatants as effectually as I could with the poker, I was constrained to demand, aloud, assistance from some of the household in reestablishing peace.

Mr. Heathcliff and his man climbed the cellar steps with vexatious phlegm: I don't think they moved one second faster than usual, though the hearth was an absolute tempest of worrying and yelping.

Happily, an inhabitant of the kitchen made more dispatch: a lusty dame, with tucked-up gown, bare arms, and fire-flushed cheeks, rushed into the midst of us flourishing a frying-pan: and used that weapon, and her tongue, to such purpose, that the storm subsided magically, and she only remained, heaving like a sea after a high wind, when her master entered on the scene.

'What the devil is the matter?' he asked, eyeing me in a manner I could ill endure after this inhospitable treatment.

'What the devil, indeed!' I muttered. 'The herd of possessed swine could have had no worse spirits in them than those animals of yours, sir. You might as well leave a stranger with a brood of tigers!'

'They won't meddle with persons who touch nothing,' he remarked, putting the bottle before me, and restoring the displaced table. 'The dogs do right to be vigilant. Take a glass of wine?'

'No, thank you.'

'Not bitten, are you?'

'If I had been, I would have set my signet on the biter.'

Heathcliff's countenance relaxed into a grin.

'Come, come,' he said, 'you are flurried, Mr. Lockwood. Here, take a little wine. Guests are so exceedingly rare in this house that I and my dogs, I am willing to own, hardly know how to receive them. Your health, sir!'

I bowed and returned the pledge; beginning to perceive that it would be foolish to sit sulking for the misbehaviour of a pack of curs: besides, I felt loath to yield the fellow further amusement at my expense; since his humour took that turn.

He—probably swayed by prudential considerations of the folly of offending a good tenant—relaxed a little in the laconic style of chipping off his pronouns and auxiliary verbs, and introduced what he supposed would be a subject

of interest to me,—a discourse on the advantages and disadvantages of my present place of retirement.

I found him very intelligent on the topics we touched; and before I went home, I was encouraged so far as to volunteer another visit to-morrow.

He evidently wished no repetition of my intrusion. I shall go, notwithstanding. It is astonishing how sociable I feel myself compared with him.

TITLE COMMENTARY

Wuthering Heights

E. P. WHIPPLE (ESSAY DATE OCTOBER 1848)

SOURCE: Whipple, E. P. "Novels of the Season." *The North American Review* 67, no. 141 (October 1848): 354-70.

In the following excerpt, Whipple presumes that the author of Wuthering Heights is male and faults the novel as amoral and offensive.

Acton Bell, the author of *Wuthering Heights*, . . . when left altogether to his own imaginations, seems to take a morose satisfaction in developing a full and complete science of human brutality. In *Wuthering Heights* he has succeeded in reaching the summit of this laudable ambition. He appears to think that spiritual wickedness is a combination of animal ferocities, and has accordingly made a compendium of the most striking qualities of tiger, wolf, cur, and wild-cat, in the hope of framing out of such elements a suitable brute-demon to serve as the hero of his novel. Compared with Heathcliff, Squeers is considerate and Quilp humane. He is a deformed monster, whom the Mephistopheles of Goethe would have nothing to say to, whom

the Satan of Milton would consider as an object of simple disgust, and to whom Dante would hesitate in awarding the honor of a place among those whom he has consigned to the burning pitch. This epitome of brutality, disavowed by man and devil, Mr. Acton Bell attempts in two whole volumes to delineate, and certainly he is to be congratulated on his success. As he is a man of uncommon talents, it is needless to say that it is to his subject and his dogged manner of handling it that we are to refer the burst of dislike with which the novel was received. His mode of delineating a bad character is to narrate every offensive act and repeat every vile expression which are characteristic. Hence, in *Wuthering Heights*, he details all the ingenuities of animal malignity, and exhausts the whole rhetoric of stupid blasphemy, in order that there may be no mistake as to the kind of person he intends to hold up to the popular gaze. Like all spendthrifts of malice and profanity, however, he overdoes the business. Though he scatters oaths as plentifully as sentimental writers do interjections, the comparative parsimony of the great novelists in this respect is productive of infinitely more effect. It must be confessed that this coarseness, though the prominent, is not the only characteristic of the writer. His attempt at originality does not stop with the conception of Heathcliff, but he aims further to exhibit the action of the sentiment of love on the nature of the being whom his morbid imagination has created. This is by far the ablest and most subtle portion of his labors, and indicates that strong hold upon the elements of character, and that decision of touch in the delineation of the most evanescent qualities of emotion, which distinguish the mind of the whole family. For all practical purposes, however, the power evinced in *Wuthering Heights* is power thrown away. Nightmares and dreams, through which devils dance and wolves howl, make bad novels.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

H. F. CHORLEY'S NEGATIVE RESPONSE TO *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*

Here are two tales [*Agnes Gray* and *Wuthering Heights*] so nearly related to *Jane Eyre* in cast of thought, incident, and language as to excite some curiosity. All three might be the work of one hand,—but the first issued remains the best. In spite of much power and cleverness; in spite of its truth to life in the remote nooks and corners of England, *Wuthering Heights* is a disagreeable story. The Bells seem to affect painful and exceptional subjects:—the misdeeds and oppressions of tyranny—the eccentricities of “woman’s fantasy.” They do not turn away from dwelling upon those physical acts of cruelty which we know to have their warrant in the real annals of crime and suffering,—but the contemplation of which true taste rejects. The brutal master of the lonely house on “Wuthering Heights”—a prison which might be pictured from life—has doubtless had his prototype in those ungenial and remote districts where human beings, like the trees, grow gnarled and dwarfed and distorted by the inclement climate; but he might have been indicated with far fewer touches, in place of so entirely filling the canvas that there is hardly a scene untainted by his presence. . . . Enough of what is mean and bitterly painful and degrading gathers round every one of us during the course of his pilgrimage through this vale of tears to absolve the Artist from choosing his incidents and characters out of such a dismal catalogue; and if the Bells, singly or collectively, are contemplating future or frequent utterances in Fiction, let us hope that they will spare us further interiors so gloomy as the one here elaborated with such dismal minuteness.

SOURCE: Chorley, H. F. “Our Library Table.” *The Athenaeum*, no. 1052 (25 December 1847): 1324-25.