

# 1 dic 2020 - The Brontë sisters

## Life and works

Charlotte (1816-55), Emily (1818-48) and Anne (1820-49) were the daughters of an Anglican clergyman of Irish origin, who had an important influence on their artistic inclinations. The Brontë sisters spent most of their life in isolation in a remote part of Yorkshire, in northern England. They did not receive a formal education. Apart from brief periods at school, they were mainly self educated, reading widely from their father's library and drawing inspiration from the local public library or from periodicals. To express their intellectual creativity and their emotions, they began to write chronicles of imaginary countries and, in 1846, they published a volume of poetry, *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell*. Like many female writers of the period, they decided to use pseudonyms. It was under these pen names that each of the sisters published their novels the following year: Charlotte (Currer) published *Jane Eyre*, Emily (Ellis) *Wuthering Heights*, and Anne (Acton) *Agnes Grey*. Only *Jane Eyre* was immediately successful, and was followed by other two novels by Charlotte: *Shirley* (1849) and *Villette* (1853). The other two sisters soon died of consumption: Emily in 1848 and Anne in 1849. Charlotte married Reverend Arthur Bell Nicholls in 1854 and died the following year, probably of an illness due to pregnancy.

## Wuthering Heights

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### Plot

The novel revolves around two houses, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, respectively inhabited by the Earnshaws and the Lintons. At the beginning of the story Mr Lockwood, the new tenant of Thrushcross Grange, visits his landlord, Mr Heathcliff, at Wuthering Heights. Forced to stay the night because of a snowstorm, Mr Lockwood has a strange dream about a girl, Catherine, who is tapping on the window, asking to be let in after 20 years of wandering on the moors. The next day Mr Lockwood returns to Thrushcross Grange and the housekeeper, Nelly Dean, tells him the whole story of the family from the Heights. Mr Earnshaw, the father of Hindley and Catherine, one day came back from Liverpool with a foundling, whom he called Heathcliff. Hindley ill-treated Heathcliff whereas Catherine got on very well with him. They roamed the moors together and promised they would stay together forever. One day Catherine was bitten by one of the Lintons' dogs and was forced to spend five weeks at Thrushcross Grange to recover, which gave her the opportunity to get to know Edgar and Isabella, as well as their quiet and refined way of life. So when a few years later Edgar proposed to her, she accepted. She told Nelly Dean she would not marry Heathcliff because he was socially inferior.

Heathcliff overheard part of the conversation and disappeared to return only three years later, handsome, rich and determined to take his revenge. He won the possession of Wuthering Heights gambling with Hindley, now a drunkard; then he eloped with Edgar's sister, Isabella, married her and treated her like a servant. Catherine fell ill and died giving birth to a daughter, Cathy. Years later, Heathcliff kidnapped Cathy and obliged her to marry his weakly, spoilt son, Linton. His revenge was thus complete since he became the owner of Thrushcross Grange, too. Nelly's narrative ends here. Mr Lockwood leaves Yorkshire and comes back after a year to find out that both Linton and Heathcliff are dead and Cathy and Hareton, Hindley's son, are going to get married, to live in peace and happiness. Nelly tells Lockwood that there are rumours in the neighbourhood that the figures of a young man and woman have been seen wandering together in the moors.

### **Setting**

The novel is built around the contrast between the two houses on the Yorkshire moors: Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. Wuthering Heights is severe and gloomy, firmly rooted in local tradition and custom; it is the appropriate background for the life of unrestrained and primitive passion led by its owner, Heathcliff. Thrushcross Grange, the home of the bourgeois Lintons, reflects their conception of life, based on stability, kindness and respectability. So the two mansions stand for two opposing forces: the principle of storm and energy on the one hand, and the principle of calm and settled assurance on the other. Though opposed, they are complementary and ideally tend to unity. With the marriage between Hareton and Cathy, they will finally compose a harmony at the end of the novel, after the consummation of Heathcliff's revenge and his death.

### **The Byronic hero**

The hero, Heathcliff, is described as a sort of 'Byronic hero', moved by irresistible passion, doomed to the despair of a solitary life and finally tending to a total identity with his love, Catherine. Yet, Heathcliff also appears as a Gothic villain in his inhuman treatment of his wife and even his son. Catherine is driven partly by her social ambitions, which finally lead her to marry Edgar, but she is also prompted to violate social conventions. She embodies a wild and Romantic nature.

### **Themes**

In the novel basic human emotions, such as love and hatred, are presented in a state of purity and concentration. The spirit of Romanticism and its concern with the human soul are still present in the correspondence between the violent passions of the characters and the wild natural landscape. Death is an important theme. Unlike other Victorian novels, where death is either a moment of forgiveness or the moment when all the conflicts are settled, in Wuthering Heights death is not an end, but a liberation of the spirit. The novel

closes with the vision of the graveyard where Catherine and Heathcliff are buried, but the author is careful to say that they are sleeping, not dead. The Gothic elements in the novel, such as the sinister atmosphere of Wuthering Heights – surrounded by the wilderness –, Catherine's ghost, and the dreams and superstitions often mentioned, are used not to frighten the reader, but to convey the struggle between the two opposed principles of love and hate, of order and chaos.

### Structure and style

The narrative mode is a system of Chinese boxes, a 'concentric' system of narratives. There are two major narrators, male and female, outsider and insider. Mr Lockwood, the polite visitor from the city, is the outsider; apart from a few occasions when he narrates what he sees, he simply writes down, in the form of a journal, what Nelly tells him. Nelly Dean is the second narrator, closely involved in the story and entirely reliable. Other characters occasionally narrate to Nelly. The narration does not proceed according to chronological time; it starts almost at the end of the story and develops a narrative within the narrative, including the use of flashbacks. This complex structure creates a sense of verisimilitude and, at the same time, a feeling of suspense. The continuous flowing of human life into the natural world creates moments of intense poetry and mysticism that are balanced by the concreteness and common sense of Nelly's language. Wuthering Heights represents a unique achievement in Victorian literature. Often compared to a Shakespearean tragedy for its rendering of turbulent passions, unnatural crimes and cruelty, the novel marked a departure from the observation of society towards the description of the individual personality, and anticipated the novelists of the early 20th century in narrative technique.

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The novel starts at the end of the story and then it is narrated in flashbacks.

This makes it a complex novel.

The atmosphere is gothic, nightmarish and unreal. The story goes backwards and forwards; the novel covers two generations of families, and it is linked by the character of Heathcliff.

There are two storytellers, Mr Lockwood and Nelly Dean, and there are three literary influences that acted on the novel:

- **romanticism**, because of the great role played by nature, that is nearly a coprotagonist; it is also romantic because Heathcliff is a byronic hero, that has a dark secret that chases and ruined his life;
- **realism**: it is mirrored in the social aspect of the novel; the features that are realistic are the description of the settings, the conflict between two cultures and also the complexity of the characters personality;

- **gothic:** there is more of a touch of gothicism: nightmarish dream, the ghosts, superstition, prophecies

The novel closes with the reconciliation of the two spheres of the fantastic and the real.

The most important theme is the analysis of passion, that transcends the romantic conception of love, which here is strong and uncontrollable; it is similar to a natural force. It is both creative and destructive, not sexual nor intellectual, but just an impulse, which binds together Catherine and Heathcliff: in fact they totally identify with each other.

Heathcliff is a romantic hero because of his aspiration toward a pure and complete identification with her. He represents the dynamic principle of the search of perfection against the static principle of acceptance of reality as it is