UNIT 7: EMILY BRONTE: *WUTHERING HEIGHTS* II

UNIT STRUCTURE

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7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through his unit, you will be able to:

- analyse the major themes that thread the narrative of the novel together and push it towards its climax
- critically assess the characters and how they fit into the novel
- discuss the narrative structure of *Wuthering Heights*
- explain the publication history of the novel and how it came to be accepted by various readerships over the years

7.2 INTRODUCTION

We have already read in the previous unit about the context against which the novel was conceived. There are certain recurring patterns that make *Wuthering Heights* an exceptional work of fiction and those patterns constantly, but very subtly, pinpoint the larger Victorian world. It would not be an exaggeration to call this novel a microcosm of the wider universe in which Emily Bronte and her siblings resided. A thorough study of the themes

and major characters will enable you to see the different forces that went in to shape a novel like the one in question.

7.3 READING THE NOVEL

7.3.1 Major Themes

Let us elaborately discuss the major themes that have merely been mentioned in the introduction. These are patterns that constantly surface in the course of the novel to give an idea of the milieu in which this novel was written.

Patriarchy :

This is a poignant theme that surfaces itself every once in a while. When Earnshaw fetches the gypsy boy from the street and commands his wife and children to treat him well, the opinions of his wife and children are not sought at all. He takes it for granted that whatever he commands them to do, it shall be obeyed without question. This is a time when patriarchy is treated as normal and men make all the decisions. Women and children are only the mute recipients of such decisions. This is also something that is carried down to the children, where the male child behaves like his father. Heathcliff, once he gains education, power and genteel manners, expects the same from his wife, Isabella. His ill treatment towards her shows the extremities of such a system. When Linton grows up into a young lad, he becomes bossy and dominating, despite his poor health. Even young Cathy is carried away by his charm of being domineering, and despises Hareton for his clumsiness. The novel seems to indicate that a woman is attracted to a man who nourishes the patriarchal mentality.

The Conflict of the Classes and Property Matters :

Another major theme in the novel is class consciousness. The Earnshaws and the Lintons are aristocratic family, and people like Ellen Dean, Joseph and Zillah are their subordinates. Heathcliff

occupies a rather liminal space; he is neither one of the masters, nor can he be classified as one of the servants. In that brief episode where the two children, Catherine and Heathcliff are caught making faces at the Linton children, both the kids are treated differently. Miss Catherine Earnshaw is treated with love and respect once her identity is revealed and Heathcliff is thrown out of the house as an embarrassing entity. When Earnshaw dies, Hindley reduces Heathcliff's position as one of the servants. Catherine also confesses in Ellen that she would marry Edgar Linton for his money and position and try to raise Heathcliff to the position of her brother so that he is treated with respect. It is very important for the characters to belong to the upper class in the society because it is the defining yardstick of an individual's worth and respect. When Heathcliff returns as a wealthy gentleman his manners charm Miss Isabella Earnshaw so much so that she elopes with him. Even marriage alliances are designed keeping in mind the property and estates of the other party. To illustrate, Heathcliff plots the relationship between Linton and Cathy, because he wishes to get hold of Thrushcross Grange through her, which she definitely will inherit. Edgar, although initially hesitates the courtship between Linton and his daughter, eventually agrees because he thinks that it is Linton who will inherit the Grange and his daughter will be secured for the rest of her life.

Health and Mortality :

These are issues that one constantly comes across while reading *Wuthering Heights.* The women characters are not very healthy and physically strong as seen here. Catherine once falls sick searching for Heathcliff in a storm. She returns to the Grange and the Linton parents catch her disease and they die. Catherine remains mentally disturbed with the return of Heathcliff and his marriage with Isabella. She remains indoors and becomes increasingly ill. Even in such health, she conceives and delivers a baby girl. She dies at childbirth. Frances dies of tuberculosis after bearing Hindley's son, Hareton. Isabella also leads a life of despair

after marrying Heathcliff. She also dies young when Linton is twelve years old. It seems the air of the Grange and the moors is constantly charged by the fear of death. Disease and death loom large in the lives of these characters.

Isolation :

Isolation seems to be one of the most appealing and sought after luxury to the characters in *Wuthering Heights*. Each character seems to have a great deal of faith in the restorative effects of isolation. Heathcliff remains aloof and so does Hindley from the rest of the family. Catherine also shuts herself in and falls sick and does not wish to see anybody after Heathcliff's elopement with Isabella. Hindley kills himself slowly by his self induced alienation and alcoholism after Frances's death. Heathcliff also prefers to remain alone after Catherine's death and he becomes almost a savage to the people around him. Lockwood's retreat to Thrushcross Grange, as is revealed to Ellen in a brief episode, is due to his preference of solitude to get over a failed romantic relationship. But soon he realises that such isolation does more harm than good and thus, he goes back to London.

Idea of the Outsider :

The idea of the 'outsider' forms a major theme in *Wuthering Heights.* For the setting of this novel, Bronte chooses a remote place in the north of England, Yorkshire. For its inhabitants, a journey to Liverpool which is approximately sixty miles away, it becomes irksome. There are moors and long stretches of barren land and one does not get to meet many people from the outside world. While they reside in the northern part of England, those from the southern part are not viewed with friendliness. When Hindley brings home his new bride, Frances, Ellen Dean views her with suspicion. She describes the new bride as 'a foreigner' and that they 'don't in general take to foreigners here…unless they take to us [them] first." This shows the cold reception of the people to anyone outside their own narrow territory. Similarly, Heathcliff is an outsider, a 'gypsy' and Mr.

Earnshaw himself addresses the boy as 'it' and describes him before his wife as "it came from the devil." Hindley refers to him as 'an imp of Satan" and the Lintons too cannot generate any warm feelings towards an outsider and describe him thus, "that strange acquisition my late neighbour made, in his journey to Liverpool—a little Lascar, or an American or Spanish castaway." These people are insulated in that small area and are not very fond of outsiders. Before they actually communicate with them, they already make assumptions about them which are not very positive. And therefore, Frances and Heathcliff become misfits and create turbulence in their seemingly composed lives.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Explain the notion of 'outsider' in the novel *Wuthering Heights*.

7.3.2 Major Characters

Wuthering Heights has some of the most interesting and intriguing characters in the history of the English novel. They have been discussed below:

Mr. Earnshaw :

He is the father of Catherine and Hindley Earnshaw and the owner of Wuthering Heights. He is a farmer, prosperous but kind-hearted. He picks up Heathcliff, a homeless boy, when he was coming back home from a business trip from Liverpool. He tries to assure Heathcliff's safety in the hands of his other family members. He is a strict father to Catherine and tries to mend Hindley's aggressive behaviour by sending him off for higher education. He is a true patriarch and receives whatever he wishes from his family. He commands respect and obedience from the rest of his family which he gets.

Mrs. Earnshaw :

She is the wife of Mr. Earnshaw and mother of Catherine and Hindley. She is suspicious of the new addition to her family, Heathcliff. She is not much visible in the narrative and dies shortly after Heathcliff's entry into the Earnshaw household.

Hindley :

He is the son of the Earnshaws and brother of Catherine. His cruelty surfaces when he is still a young boy. He has a strange dislike for Heathcliff and protests his entry into the house. He grows crueler towards Heathcliff with the passage of time. He also becomes cold-hearted towards Catherine for her empathy towards the orphan. When Mr. Earnshaw dies, he comes back to Wuthering Heights as the new patriarch and commands respect from everyone. He reduces Heathcliff's position to that of the servants. He brings home his wife Frances when he returns. After her death, he becomes isolated and takes to drinking and alcoholism. It is at this point that Heathcliff gains power over him and becomes the new tyrant of Wuthering House. Hindley dies soon after a fight between Heathcliff and him, where he wants to murder Heathcliff but gets wounded instead.

Catherine :

Mischievous, spoilt and carefree, she is the daughter of the Earnshaws and sister of Hindley. She is the only person, after her father, who is empathetic towards Heathcliff. Their friendship later develops into a passionate love interest. She confesses her love for Heathcliff before Ellen but is also equally conscious of her social status. She learns to behave more ladylike after her accidental visit to Thrushcross Grange. She is charmed by Edgar Linton's genteel ways, however, her love for Heathcliff works at a more serious and deeper level. This is proved after the mysterious disappearance of Heathcliff from Wuthering Heights and she falls sick after searching for him at night in the storm. She stops eating and sleeping and remains behind closed doors most of the time, despite the care and attention of her husband. She is unable to accept the fact that

Heathcliff has eloped with Isabella, her sister-in-law. Her forgiveness also comes instantly when Heathcliff comes back to meet her, when Edgar is away, and they reunite passionately. She dies after giving birth to Edgar's daughter, Cathy.

Frances :

She is the wife of Hindley and she is from the South of England. As is the general attitude of the people of the village, she is not received warmly by the Earnshaw family. She is viewed with suspicion and coldness. She does not like Heathcliff and is often cruel to him. She dies of tuberculosis soon after giving birth to a son, Hareton.

Heathcliff :

He is the male protagonist of the novel because it is with his appearance in the narrative that the lives of the Earnshaws and Lintons are disrupted. He is person with no known family lineage. He is picked up from the streets by Mr. Earnshaw in one of his business trips, when he was returning home. He is looked down as an outsider and although adopted, he is not counted as one of the Earnshaws. Even the servants of the Earnshaw family despise him as 'strange' and 'a gypsy'. His attitude towards Hindley remains cold and cruel throughout the novel. He makes himself impressive before Isabella and makes her fall in love with him. He does this to avenge Edgar's marriage with his own love interest, Catherine. He is also a scheming man when he plots the courtship between young Cathy and his own son, Linton, in order to acquire the estate, Thrushcross Grange. His untamed passion for Catherine flowers fully after her death when he becomes more and more mysterious and cruel. His end is also equally mysterious, when he is discovered dead in his room wearing a devilish grin.

Mr. Linton :

He is the father of Edgar and Isabella and the owner of Thrushcross Grange. He takes good care of his children and wishes to raise them as respectable young people of their rank.

Mrs. Linton :

She is the wife of Mr. Linton and mother of Edgar and Isabella. She is a hypocritical woman who cannot stand Heathcliff because his origins are unknown. She does everything to spoil her children and does not allow them to be near Heathcliff. It is she who insists Catherine on learning the ways and etiquettes of young ladies of the upper class. Both Mr. and Mrs. Linton die after being affected by Catherine's fever.

Edgar :

The son of the Lintons, he is a spoilt boy. He is well-bred and has all the charms of the young men of the upper class. He charms Catherine with his gentlemanliness but this becomes futile when it comes to the practical level. He is a cowardly man and fails to act strong when his wife (Catherine), sister (Isabella) and daughter (Cathy) become affected by the evil schemes of Heathcliff. When Catherine starts throwing tantrums for her unsuccessful relationship with Heathcliff, Edgar stands there helpless. His fight with Heathcliff only takes a negative turn when he finds Isabella elope with him. As a father, he cannot stop Cathy from visiting Wuthering Heights and finally approves of her marriage with Linton Heathcliff.

Isabella :

Equally spoilt like her brother Edgar, she is the daughter of the Lintons. As a child she despises Heathcliff as if he were a creature. But when he returns as a young man with education, wealth and manners, she is romantic by his romantic appeal. She elopes with him and realises her mistake. She keeps in touch with Ellen Dean and confides in telling her about Heathcliff's brutality. She lives a life of negligence from her husband who only uses her as an instrument to ruin the Linton family. She gives birth to a feeble son, Linton. She stays away from her husband with her son and her son gets to meet Heathcliff only after her death, when Linton is twelve years old.

Cathy :

She is the daughter of Catherine and Edgar Linton. Like her mother, she is free-spirited and mischievous. She is arrogant, carefree and temperamental like her mother. But Edgar's guidance has made her kinder and more considerate than Catherine. She pursues her connection with Wuthering Heights and relationship with Linton after repeated warnings from Ellen Dean and her father and this reflects the stubborn and impetuous nature of her mother. But her compassion towards Hareton and her attempts at teaching him to read and write also reflects the elder Catherine's compassion towards Heathcliff. Finally, she emerges as the mode of restoring order and peace to the troubled life of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange by deciding to marry Hareton.

Hareton :

He is the son of Hindley and Frances Earnshaw. After his parents' death, he starts depending entirely on Heathcliff. To avenge the bitter attitude and ill treatment of Hindley towards him, Heathcliff misbehaves and ill treats Hareton. He turns him into an illiterate farm worker. Hareton, under Heathcliff's dark influence, becomes quick-tempered and is easily humiliated. However, with Cathy around he shows a tendency to improve and possesses a much kinder heart than his father and this nature makes him win Cathy's heart after Linton's death.

Linton :

He is the son of Heathcliff and Isabella, and although peevish, he is commanding and arrogant. He constantly remains ill. He grows up in London under the care of his mother and meets his father only after her death, when he is twelve years old. He is despised by his father and becomes instrumental in Heathcliff's plan of acquiring the estate of the Lintons by forcibly making him court Cathy. He weds Cathy under Heathcliff's pressure but dies soon after.

Ellen Dean :

She is a strong character in the plot because we get to know about the Earnshaws and Lintons through her narration. She is the caretaker of the house of the Earnshaws and becomes deeply involved with the children, Hindley and Catherine and later, Cathy. She is compassionate and intelligent and she cannot remain objective in her narration of the two families' history. Sometimes her feelings get underway. She is also a confidant to the women in the novel—to Catherine, to Isabella and to Cathy. She is loyal to the Earnshaw family and does what is best to keep the family together. Her narration often gets problematic when she becomes overtly emotional and gets involved in her own narration.

Joseph :

He is also the servant at Wuthering Heights, but unlike Ellen, he is unkind and cruel. He is obsessively religious and speaks with a Yorkshire accent.

Mr. Lockwood :

Although he is not directly involved with either of the two families, his presence is important in the novel for providing room for Ellen's narration to develop. It is because of his probing that Ellen Dean shares the history of the two families and through him, the reader gets acquainted with the entangled lives of the people in that remote village. Mr. Lockwood goes to this rural retreat to recover from his own romantic failure. Mr. Lockwood comes from a disciplined country life in London and finds the atmosphere of Wuthering Heights in total contrast to the place he is familiar with. He finds the cold attitude of the people around him in that place quite unsettling. He remains distanced from the characters in Ellen's narration and his vanity and presumptuous nature often make him a complicated narrator.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 2: Give a character sketch of Ellen Dean. Is she reliable as a narrator?

7.3.3 Narrative Style

The narrative structure of *Wuthering Heights* is rather complex with two apparent narrators, Lockwood and Ellen Dean, and the brief narrative threads of other characters like Heathcliff, Zillah, Cathy and Isabella often interspersing. Catherine does not interact with the reader directly, but through her diary entries. Till Chapter Fourteen, Lockwood is the narrator, improvising upon Ellen's narration of the history of the two families. His English is sophisticated, sometimes punctuating with words of Greek or Latin origin. But such a narration tends to be biased since Lockwood's is doubly distanced from the events that had already occurred and he comes to know of all this through Ellen. After Chapter Fifteen, Ellen Dean becomes the narrator, and her narration could be perceived more authentic than Lockwood's in that she has the first hand experience of all the events that had occurred. She has grown up with the Earnshaw children (Catherine, Hindley and Heathcliff) and has witnessed almost all the experiences in the lives of the two families. She also stands witness to the second generation of the Earnshaws and Lintons. However, her narration too is not without prejudice. Sometimes, it seems she prefers Edgar to Heathcliff while sometimes it is the other way round. But her plain language and her typical accent offer flavour to the narrative. Since, she had the first hand experience of all the bygone events, Bronte allows her the liberty to dramatise them in a way that the reader feels as if they are not things from the remote past, but of a recent time.

7.4 CRITICAL RECEPTION

At the time of its publication, *Wuthering Heights* received mixed reviews from readers and publishers. In the earlier reviews, the critics showed their wariness in accepting a text that was unconventional and unsettling at the same time. However, the earlier reviews were not without a word or two of appreciation for a novel that had a challenging plot, more so, because it was the product of imagination of a woman writer. The novel can be read as a synthesis between the romantic novel and gothic fiction. It has been often labelled as 'anti-Christian' (for some religious readings of *Wuthering Heights,* J. Hillis Miller's *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth Century Writers* [pg. 259] can be consulted). Notwithstanding the negative criticisms, the novel has survived and generated many interesting essays and theories in literature. The novel has also been adapted into many film productions.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Fill in the blanks with appropriate words:

a. Heathcliff and Frances are considered as ……. by the Earnshaws and Ellen Dean.

b. Catherine does not communicate with the reader in person but through her…….

c. Lockwood is the narrator, improvising upon……. narration of the history of the two families.

d. ……..… is forcibly made to court Cathy by Heathcliff.

e. Frances dies of ……. soon after giving birth to a son, Hareton.

f. Linton Heathcliff does not meet his father until he is ……..…years old.



7.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit gives an interesting insight into the plot, characterisation and narrative structure of *Wuthering Heights*. The whole range of characters serves to portray intriguing contradictions or opposite pairs like master-slave relationship, the insider-outsider dichotomy, the benevolent-malevolent forces, etc. The narrative framework provides sufficient room to each character to come and comment on the series of events from his/her own perspective. The unit discusses the social stratification and the representatives of each social stratum as portrayed in the novel, which becomes a microcosm of the society at large.



7.6 FURTHER READING

1) Miller, Hillis J. (1963). *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth Century Writers.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

2) Tytler, Graeme. Ed. (2018). *Facets of Wuthering Heights. Selected Essays.*Leicestershire: The Bronte Society.



7.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: For the setting of this novel, Bronte chooses a remote place in the north of England, Yorkshire and those from the southern part are not viewed with friendliness. There are many instances of cold reception of the people to anyone outside their own narrow territory. For example, Heathcliff is an outsider, a 'gypsy' and Mr. Earnshaw himself addresses the boy as 'it' and describes him before his wife as "it came from the devil." Before they actually communicate with them, they already make assumptions about them which are not very positive.

Ans to Q No 2: Ellen Dean is the caretaker of the house of the Earnshaws and becomes deeply involved with the children, Hindley and Catherine