

## LESSON 10.

## ROMANTICISM AND VICTORIANISM IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

### Gothic Romanticism in the Novels of the Brontë Sisters

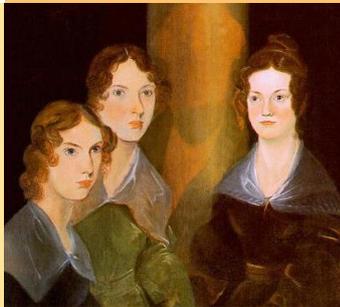
**AIM OF THIS UNIT:** The unit explains the significance of the Brontë sisters in Victorian literature with close readings of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*.

**KEY FIGURES:** Anne Brontë, Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë

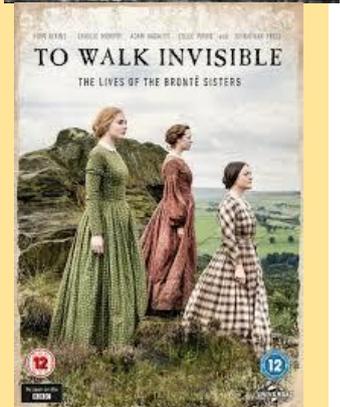
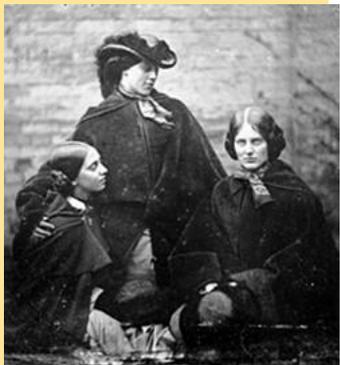
**COMPULSORY READING:** Emily Brontë: *Wuthering Heights*

**KEY WORDS & TOPICS:** gothic romanticism, madwoman in the attic, Electra complex, dark double, Liebestod, governess novel, sensation novel, family romance, double Bildungsroman, homely Gothic, social problem novel, Florence Nightingale, Married Women's Property Act

#### THE ART AND LIFE OF THE BRONTË SISTERS



The Brontë sisters painted by their brother Branwell



The Brontë sisters, Charlotte (1816-55), Emily (1818-48), Anne (1820-49) wrote under male pennames (Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell) at a time when artistic *creativity* was mostly a privilege of men. (Women were commonly associated with their normatively idealised *procreative*, childbearing potential, or at most with lesser genres George Eliot referred to as “silly novels by lady novelists”.) Today their novels are known as literary classics. Their best known works – Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, Anne's *Agnes Grey* – were all published in 1847, a miraculous year for the siblings.

In **their art** they appropriated conventions of the novel form to render a vision of their own, modifying and merging a variety of subgenres (Bildungsroman, romance, Gothic fiction, ghost story, regional novel, psychological realism). Refusing socially assigned positions of passive reader-consumers or scribbling women, they creatively invented their own voices as self-conscious artists.

Their writing ties in with the generic characteristics of the **Mid-Victorian novel** distinguished by a new view of man and society.

The books fictionalised the experiences of

- ✓ rootlessness, restlessness, social mobility, doubts about one's fixed place in social hierarchy,
- ✓ individual's responsibility for moral choices,
- ✓ psychological turmoil: clash between id and superego
- ✓ cultural, historical determinism: fate-determining forces of being conditioned by inherited environment, natural given,
- ✓ plot grounded in the evolution of a character determined by duty and freed by renunciation, rebellious individual will,
- ✓ social questions (abuse of power, racism, women as property)

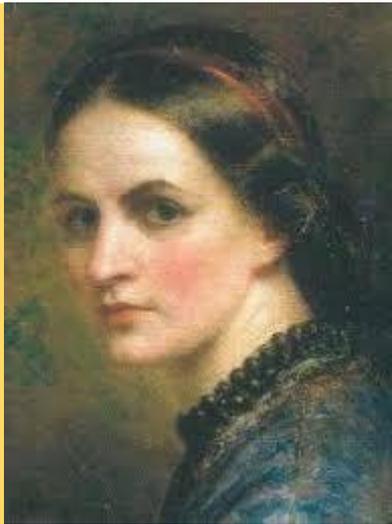
Their triple **biography** is marked by the myth of the doomed family, and the romanticised figure of lonesome orphans who lived in a private world of daydreams, gifted and cursed with clandestine creativity, overactive imagination, and vehement passions. The Brontës sisters' father, a poor Irish Anglican clergyman was appointed as the rector of the village of Haworth, on the Yorkshire moors. After the death of the girls' mother in 1821, their Aunt Elizabeth came to look after the six children and the family that functioned as a somewhat claustrophobic, self-sufficient unit separated from the rest of the world.

The siblings were often left alone together and began writing compulsively at an early age, entertaining each other with the invented fantasy kingdoms of **Angria and Gondal**. (These magic kingdoms were full of melodrama, Byronic villains, violence, wondrous, fantastic events and a strong moral strain suggestive of parsonage life.) The three sisters' first **joint volume of poetry** printed at their own expense (1846) attracted little attention. Success came later when they put their passions in the popular **Bildungsroman** novelistic form. *Wuthering Heights* was condemned by some critics because of its harsh violence and immorality (its author was believed to be a deranged man) and heralded by others for its narrative structure. *Agnes Gray* was appreciated for seriously discussing the difficulties of poor educated women of the times. It was *Jane Eyre* that became a real bestseller. Charlotte lived the longest and earned the most literary fame during the Victorian era.

The Brontë sisters' **childhood experiences** had a considerably impact on their literary writings' gothic romantic atmosphere. These **vital influencing factors** – listed below – all stimulated intense affective reactions (melancholy, anxiety, insatiable yearning) which can be tracked in the psychological characterisation of their fictional figures.

- ✚ **Early death of mother, introvert father, brother's addiction** to drugs and drinks (see representation of alcoholism in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*) (the sisters took care of the father when he became sick, he eventually survived all his children who died of tuberculosis, possibly contaminating each other),
- ✚ **Orphanhood, emotional deprivation, hypersensitive personalities, private world of daydreams shared by sisters**, (see *Jane Eyre*)
- ✚ **Aunt's Calvinistic worldview** (threats of eternal punishment, pedagogy of fear),
- ✚ **Family servant's folk-tales and superstitions**, (see ghosts in *Villette*, *WH*)
- ✚ **Spirit of the moorland** surrounding Haworth parsonage: a gloomy, mysterious, 'uncivilised' location mirroring psychic struggles, rebellious spirits, passionate souls depicted in the novels, (→see regional novel aspect of *Wuthering Heights*)
- ✚ **Clergy Daughters School**: humiliation, poor food, harsh regime, typhoid fever epidemic, terrible conditions affecting health, psychic and physical development of pupils (→fictionalised in *Jane Eyre*) The four eldest girls (excluding Anne) entered the school which educated the offspring of less prosperous clergy members. Maria and Elizabeth fell gravely ill, were removed from the institution, and died shortly afterwards. Charlotte and Emily were also withdrawn from the school and returned to Haworth.
- ✚ **Frail health**: After erratic schooling, then brief teaching or governess posts in their adulthood, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne returned to Haworth to look after their sick father. Tormented by anxiety because of their addict brother, they all struggled against ill-health. The sisters eventually likely died of consumption, the wasting disease romanticised in the era, today referred to as tuberculosis. (see consumptive characters: Helen Burns in *Jane Eyre*, Frances Hindley in *Wuthering Heights*, Mark Wood in *Agnes Grey*, theme of contagion in *Shirley*)

## ANNE BRONTË (1820-1849)



[READ MORE ON THE VICTORIAN GOVERNESS NOVEL AT THE VICTORIAN WEB BY CLICKING HERE](#)

**Anne Brontë's** debut novel *Agnes Grey* (1847), published under the penname Acton Bell, was likely based on her own experiences as a governess. The novel commented on the restricted possibilities of middle class women seeking a respectable form of paid employment. It dealt with issues of social inequality, oppression, abuse of women, isolation, and empathy. In a mock-Bildungsroman form the heroine's coming of age failed to result in her gain in moral virtue.

The novel explores the precarious social position of the governess. Neither a family member, nor a complete outsider, esteemed for her intellect but despised as a servant and a spinster, oscillating between the status of an intimate ally or accomplice aware of family secrets and a neglected, inferior, invisible presence, the governess embodies the marginal figure per se, and hence excites Victorian imagination. The socially intermediate status functioned as "a device to bring the governess's plight into focus, and to furnish the writer with a framework of female development" in the popular **governess novel** genre.

An actual historical figure who likely inspired Anne Brontë's representation of the working woman was **Florence Nightingale**, a pioneering nurse, humanist and feminist, commonly referred to as the Lady with the Lamp, who nursed soldiers and introduced sanitary reforms during the time of the Crimean War. She was also famed for criticising marriage as an institutionalized form of dependence.

Anne Brontë's second and final novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) protested the **subordinate position of women in marriage**. Its plot focused on a drastically unhappy marriage and the heroine's escape from it. The graphic description of the husband's alcoholism and debauchery was profoundly disturbing for Victorian sensibilities. Yet the book –bordering on a sensation novel because of the tackling of these taboo topics – became an instant success and sold out within a few weeks' time. Despite the scrutinisation of characters' emotional motivations, the novel holds social critical potential and a political message that resonates with the thoughts of the suffrage movement. When Anne's heroine leaves her husband and decides to support herself and her son by painting, she violates both social conventions and the current English legal regulations which stipulate that married women cannot own property of their own, sue for divorce, or control custody of their children. (The [Married Women's Property Act](#) of 1870 slightly improved the subordinate status of women.)



READ

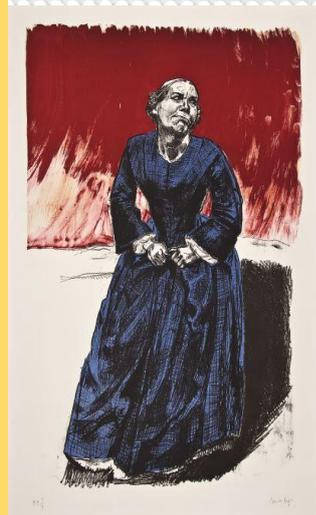
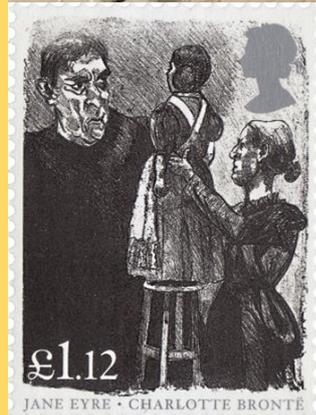
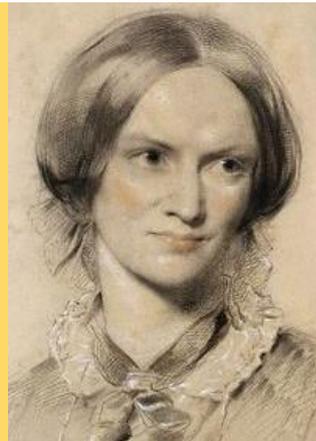
Read more about the Brontë sisters at the British Library's *Discovering Literature* Website.

[CLICK HERE](#) to read about fantasy and realism in *Wuthering Heights*

[CLICK HERE](#) to read about the rebellious child in *Jane Eyre*

[CLICK HERE](#) to read about the madwoman in the attic in *Jane Eyre*

## CHARLOTTE BRONTË (1816-1855)



Paula Rego's illustrations to Jane Eyre

✚ **Jane Eyre** (1847), Charlotte Brontë's most famous novel is a **fictional autobiography**. Its first person singular voiced narrator is a plain and small<sup>1</sup> but headstrong governess who matures – conforming to the *Bildungsroman* plotline – from poor orphan and abused child into a humble governess, then a respectable wife.

✚ The novel recycles a number of **fairy-tale themes**, such as the “**from rags to riches**” story of social ascension familiar from *Cinderella*, the interspecies romance and “incompatible opposites attract” trope from *Beauty and the Beast*, and the doomed, all engulfing passion motif of *Bluebeard*.

✚ Conforming to the conventional structure of the traditional **family romance**, the lovers can finally reunite after complicated yet predictable *détours* of the plot. Yet the sentimental novel scenario is subverted on multiple grounds.

✚ With a **feminist twist** the ‘same old love story’ theme is troubled as the ‘happy ending’ implies that:

1. The new couple can get together only at the price of eliminating the previous wife.

2. Rochester becomes blind in the fire (symbolising passion). He is disabled while Jane gains agency, on becoming responsible to look after him. She becomes his eyes, hence challenges the male gaze<sup>2</sup>.

3. ““*Reader, I married him*”<sup>3</sup> is Jane's defiant conclusion to her rollercoaster story. It is not, “*Reader, he married me*” — as you would expect in a Victorian society where women were supposed to be passive; or even, “*Reader, we married.*” Instead Jane asserts herself; she is the driving force of her narrative.” (Tracy Chevalier)

✚ Unlike sentimental novels that exploited the reader's capacity for tenderness, the novel shocked Victorian readers by recycling taboo themes familiar from **sensation novels** (*ménage à trois*, bigamy, pyromania, transvestism, attempted murder, insanity)

✚ and **Gothic fiction** (the madwoman in the attic: the darker double, the shadow of the Angel in the House, unfeminine madness, Rochester's supernatural call to Jane, haunted house theme). The novel can be associated with the **homely Gothic** subgenre: a dark secret that should have remained hidden comes to light within the safe environment of home that suddenly emerges in a new light as unfamiliar, dangerous, and claustrophobic.

✚ The novel performs **social criticism** commenting on child abuse

<sup>1</sup> Charlotte told her sisters that her aim was to create ‘a heroine as plain, and as small as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours’.

<sup>2</sup> The male gaze is a feminist term that problematises the unequal distribution of power positions. Men act as active onlookers, while women “appear” objectified, eroticised, reduced to passive spectacles to be looked at.

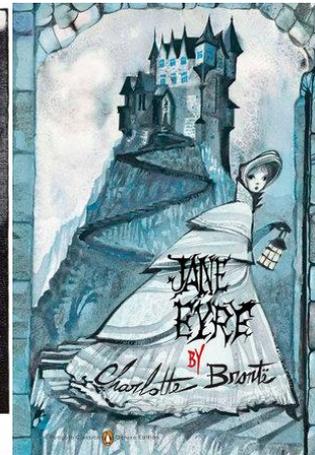
<sup>3</sup> Speaking out of the text, addressing the reader beyond the pages of the book, shifting narrative registers (from intradiegetic to extradiegetic level) is a postmodern narrative device called metalepsis.

, the feminisation of insanity, women's imprisonment in gender stereotypes, the transitional position of the governess suspended between social classes, the double standard in the evaluation of male and female passions, among others.

- ✚ The author mixes the **novelistic tropes of her time** (the Dickensian Bildungsroman/social problem novel's typical character of the *unjustly suffering innocent orphan figure*, the *raging madwoman* of sensation/ Gothic fiction) with her own **autobiographical experiences** (being educated at Clergy Daughter's School, working as a governess).
- ✚ The novel has exciting **scientific implications**: it criticises the **Darwinian** view of **degeneration** as a maternal inheritance and the idea of moral insanity. (With the figures of Bertha and Grace Pool it demonstrates how the era associates madness with moral corruption, poverty, debauchery, alcoholism, and racial difference). A popular book of natural history, *A History of British Birds* illustrated by Thomas Bewick offers bookish young Jane an escape from her bullying cousins; and the strangely impressive words the texts and images transport her to foreshadow her future encounters with the supernatural. *Jane Eyre* strategically uses bird imagery and avian metaphors: Jane emerges as dove, linnet, skylark, while Rochester as eagle, cormorant.
- ✚ Further features include: **melancholic tone, ambiguous sensations, psychological realism**: description of physically powerful emotions, psychological instability, oscillation between hope and renunciation, between bodily control and overwhelming desire



"THEN MR. ROCHESTER WAS AT HOME WHEN THE FIRE BROKE OUT?"



**The Madwoman in the Attic** is a powerful symbolical figure in *Jane Eyre*, and in Victorian fiction in general. In Charlotte Brontë's novel, Rochester's former wife, Bertha Mason who became violently insane, is locked up in her room on the third floor of Thornfield Hall, and occasionally emerges as an uncanny absent presence, a ghost from the past to disturb the budding domestic bliss of Jane and Rochester. Bertha's bestial rage eventually sets the house on **fire** (the flames representing her wild passions), and although Rochester attempts to save her, she throws herself off from the roof, and hence leaves her husband free to marry Jane.

**Psychoanalytically informed feminist readings** (Gilbert & Gubar 1979) interpreted the raging madwoman Bertha as a **dark double** of docile Victorian femininity represented by plain and pure Jane. If Jane embodies the era's gender stereotype of the **Angel in the House**, Bertha stands for the **Fallen Woman**, who is corrupted, bestial, brutal, passionate. Bertha's rage might even symbolize the repressed aggressive/erotic impulses, and creative energies of the gentle governess Jane. In fantastic fiction the attic or the cellar – places which belong to the house but are in a way invisible, mostly uninhabited, permeated by an atmosphere of

anxiety and gloominess – represent the unconscious realm, whereas the ground floor (where Jane lives) stand for the superego.

The novel can be criticised for the **lack of female sisterly solidarity**: the first wife must die (must be written out of the story) so that Jane and Rochester can live happily ever after. Yet it is exciting to note that Jane also had her episodes of raging madness during her childhood when she used to be a “bad child”, a “wild cat.” There is a memorable episode in the novel when she is falsely accused of lying and is closed up in the **Red Room**: her tantrum signifies a rebellion against normative society forcing false narratives upon her (associating her poverty, her femininity, and her age with moral corruption; degrading/disabling/”othering” her multiply marginalised identity position). Her madness marks a passionate quest for a self-authored identity. While seeking herself, Jane must fight the **Electra complex** – in Jungian psychology the term refers to a girl’s psychosexual competition with her mother for the possession of the father figure – and defeat her female rival.

Through the lens of **medical humanities/ disability studies** the figure of the madwoman reveals a lot about the contemporary view and treatments of mental disorders. Victorians made a distinction between **melancholic and raging madness (Ophelia versus Lucia of Lammermoor)**. They often romanticised female psychological disorders, especially losing one’s mind because of heartbreak: pathologisation coincided with eroticisation. While nervous disorders of the upper classes were associated with the hypersensitivity of a noble soul and a fragile physical frame, the insanity of the lower classes was commonly associated with degeneration, bestiality, and moral corruption. Female rebelliousness – the unwillingness to comply with social codes of conduct expecting women to be submissive and sweet – was seen as mental disorder in the need of cure. (Doctors advised these female patients to pursue less intellectual activities, and beware of readings that would overexcite their imagination, to undergo rest cure, and to marry and to give birth to children at their earliest convenience, to calm their nerves.)

The representation of Bertha’s madness borders on **fantastification**. The **madwoman emerges as a monster**. She is referred to as a clothed hyena, a wild beast, a hideous demon, a vampire, a goblin, an exotic other, an abject and passionate wretch, an “it”, marked by her hysteric laughter, bestial screams, and inability of meaningful rational verbalisation. Her elimination from the story is necessary for the purification of Jane’s microcosm and Victorian society at large. She is the evil in Rochester’s soul from which he must be purified in the final purgatorial fire.

**Postcolonial and socialist critics** problematize the fact that madness is represented in terms of sexual, racial, and class difference. Bertha comes from Jamaica, her dangerous instability is a symptom of her hereditary disease resulting of her ethnic difference, and mixed race Creole heritage. The fear of racial difference surfaces elsewhere in the text when Jane is first faced with Bertha’s savage looks, she compares her to a “German vampire.” The madwoman’s solitary confinement is assisted only by her suspicious, debauched, and alcoholic maid, Grace Pool, a hired nurse who emerges as Bertha’s lowly double, and an embodiment of the dark and dangerous working class lurking on the periphery of the safe and clean bourgeois home.

The novel holds exciting **legal implications**: Bertha is insane but Rochester cannot divorce her, because her actions are uncontrollable, and hence an illegitimate ground for divorce.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Note that Charlotte Brontë dedicates the second edition to Thackeray whose literary work she admired. She was unaware that **Thackeray** had a mentally ill wife locked away in an institution whom the author was unable to divorce. Rumours abounded after the dedication.



**READ the extracts below. How is the Madwoman in the Attic represented? How is she contrasted with the Angel in the House?**

*He lifted the hangings from the wall, uncovering the second door: this, too, he opened. In a room without a window, there burnt a fire guarded by a high and strong fender, and a lamp suspended from the ceiling by a chain. Grace Poole bent over the fire, apparently cooking something in a saucepan. In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face.... A fierce cry seemed to give the lie to her favourable report: the clothed hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind-feet.*

*"Ah! sir, she sees you!" exclaimed Grace: "you'd better not stay."*

*"Take care then, sir! — for God's sake, take care!"*

*The maniac bellowed: she parted her shaggy locks from her visage, and gazed wildly at her visitors. I recognised well that purple face, — those bloated features. Mrs. Poole advanced.*

*"Keep out of the way," said Mr. Rochester, thrusting her aside: "she has no knife now, I suppose, and I'm on my guard."*

*"One never knows what she has, sir: she is so cunning: it is not in mortal discretion to fathom her craft."*

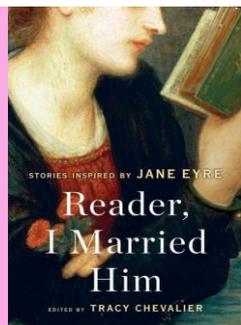
*"We had better leave her," whispered Mason.*

*Go to the devil!" was his brother-in-law's recommendation.*

*"Ware!" cried Grace. The three gentlemen retreated simultaneously. Mr. Rochester flung me behind him: the lunatic sprang and grappled his throat viciously, and laid her teeth to his cheek: they struggled. She was a big woman, in stature almost equalling her husband, and corpulent besides: she showed virile force in the contest — more than once she almost throttled him, athletic as he was. He could have settled her with a well-planted blow; but he would not strike: he would only wrestle. At last he mastered her arms; Grace Poole gave him a cord, and he pinioned them behind her: with more rope, which was at hand, he bound her to a chair. The operation was performed amidst the fiercest yells and the most convulsive plunges. Mr. Rochester then turned to the spectators: he looked at them with a smile both acrid and desolate.*

*"That is my wife," said he. "Such is the sole conjugal embrace I am ever to know — such are the endearments which are to solace my leisure hours! And this is what I wished to have" (laying his hand on my shoulder): "this young girl, who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell, looking collectedly at the gambols of a demon, I wanted her just as a change after that fierce ragout. Wood and Briggs, look at the difference! Compare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder — this face with that mask — this form with that bulk; then judge me, priest of the gospel and man of the law, and remember with what judgment ye judge ye shall be judged! Off with you now. I must shut up my prize.,,*





The Madwoman refuses to stay locked away in the attic. **Here is a list of Jane Eyre's 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> century rewritings/reimaginings:**  
Daphne Du Maurier: *Rebecca* (1938)  
Hitchcock: *Rebecca* (1940)  
Jean Rhys: *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)  
Jasper Fforde: *The Eyre Affair* (2001)  
Paula Rego, lithographes to *Jane Eyre* (2002)  
Tracy Chevalier. *Reader, I Married Him. Stories Inspired by Jane Eyre* (2016)  
Alice Brosh McKenna & Ramon Perez. *Jane* (graphic novel, 2017)

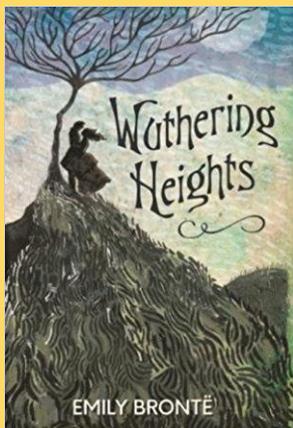
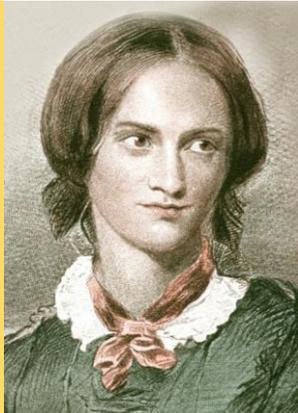
### Further Novels by Charlotte Brontë

The opening chapter of *Shirley* (1849) warns readers that – unlike in the author's previous novel, *Jane Eyre* – they will not find “passion, and stimulus, and melodrama” in the pages that follow but something “real, cool, solid, and unromantic as Monday morning.” The **social problem novel** is set in the Northern part of England during the final years of the Napoleonic Wars and thematises ominous events that unfolded in Yorkshire during the industrial depression including a machine-breaking incident, a **Luddite riot**, conflicts between workers and employers in the textile industry, and an assassination attempt on a local mill owner. The **unmarried spinsters** and the **unemployed mill workers** are “signs that healthy circulation within the matrimonial and labour markets has been blocked off, and that ordinarily productive economies have closed down” (Shuttleworth). Instead of elaborating on a romance line, Brontë brings the full strength of her poetic abilities to bear on the landscape in lengthy descriptions of natural surroundings (Coriale).

*Villette* (1853) – a reworking of Charlotte Brontë's posthumously published first novel *The Professor* – fused the popular sentimental theme of the “**master and pupil romance**” with some of her personal experiences, fictionalising a period of her life when in her twenties she was teaching English in a *pensionnat* (boarding school) in Brussels and fell in love with a married pedagogue. The subjective, (**fictional**) **autobiographical** tone is reinforced by the first person singular confessional narrative of Lucy Snowe. The heroine is rebelling against her social circumstances: as a self-reliable working woman she seeks economic independence (unlike Jane Austen's heroines trapped within the confines of the marriage market), and (much like Jane Eyre) she takes pride in her intelligence and refuses to use her appearance, her feminine charms as social capital. Brontë projects psychological depth onto Lucy's character: we feel her unease and homesickness caused by her geographical and cultural dislocation as a stranger in a foreign country; her intimidation by Rochester-like arrogant and prickly Monsieur Emanuel she grows infatuated with; her struggle with isolation, solitude, and poverty as a working woman who is unwilling or unable to comply with expectations of femininity; as well as her efforts to mature from passive, obedient girl into a woman who is confident in her own choices. Apart from the obvious **Bildungsroman** theme, the novel bears features of **Gothic fiction** (the ghost of a nun revisits Lucy several times), and has been praised for its description of emotional attraction as a mixture of spiritual and physical longing, an experience transcending sensuality. Lucy's a **complex narrative voice**, who simultaneously elicits empathy and remains distant, and might occasionally be intentionally disorienting the reader. The ending is ambiguous, Monsieur Emanuel declares his love to Lucy and arranges for her to become the headmistress of her own dayschool, but he sails away (to oversee a plantation on the West Indies) perhaps never to return, as Lucy says: "*M. Emanuel was away three years. Reader, they were the three happiest years of my life.*"

*A notable difference in imaginative quality separates the novels of Charlotte and Emily Brontë from those of the other great novelists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The difference appears to be one of emotional intensity, the product of a unique concentration upon fundamental human passion in a state approaching essential purity. ...An astonishing mixture of romantic commonplace and personal inspiration, primitive feeling and spiritual exaltation... (Traversi 247)*

## EMILY BRONTË (181-1848)

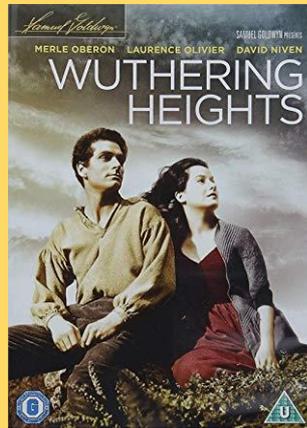


Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) is a novel revolutionary in poetic concept and narrative structure.

- ✚ It was regarded as a scandalous work in its time because of its focus on the **darker side of love**. It tells a story about **all-engulfing fatal passion** that reaches beyond death, and blurs the desires of destruction and self-annihilation. It is an early literary fictionalisation of the intertwined **Freudian psychoanalytical notions of the pleasure principle and the death drive**. The depiction of psychic and physical violence rupturing romantic relationships, aggressive/ sexual impulses, and dangerous, bestial instincts overwhelming the rational mind were considered as improper taboo topics conforming to the era's bourgeois codes of politeness. The book boldly troubled Victorian ideals regarding religious hypocrisy, moral worth, naturalised class differences and gender inequality, while combining narratological strategies of the **psychological novel**, the **social problem novel**, and the **regional novel**. The style flickers between **gothic romanticism** and **flinty realism**.
- ✚ The Shakespearean/ **Romantic Liebestod** theme of **star-crossed lovers** who can only unite in death (see *Romeo & Juliet*) is revisited in the insatiable yearning of the two protagonists, Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff. The story is a **failed family romance**. The couple's amorous relationship is hindered by their class differences, family conflicts, wrong decisions, the anxiety of atonement, a remorseful revolt against social expectations, as well as the twin characters' vehement temper, and their excessive resemblance (*"He shall never know I love him: and that, not because he's handsome, but because he's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made out of, his and mine are the same."*) These eventually peak in a **revenge tragedy**, and a **gothic ghost fantasy** aftermath.
- ✚ The book recycles easily recognizable symbols and **fairy tale fantasy tropes**. At the beginning, mirroring the *Beauty and the Beast* plot, Catherine, the heiress of the mansion Wuthering Heights, a beautiful wild child asks her father to fetch her a gift from the city market. Instead of the whip she wants (symbolising her violent, passionate temper), the old man brings home a gypsy boy, a foundling of dubious origins called Heathcliff. (His lack of last name suggests he might be a fairy changeling; he is also referred in the novel as *"a wolfish man"* and *"the devil"*

*“We seem at times to breathe lightning. Emily was a natural genius, a native and nursling of the moors who worked in a wild workshop, with simple tools, out of homely materials.”*  
Charlotte Brontë on *Wuthering Heights*

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*incarnate*”, while Catherine is *“magically ministering angel..beneficent fairy...little witch”*). He grows up together with her as a foster brother and a genuine soulmate.

The pair eventually breaks each other’s hearts as Catherine – obeying social expectations instead of her own desires – marries the soft and sickly Edgar Linton from the neighbouring mansion Thrushcross Grange, and feels disillusioned for her entire life, while Heathcliff, a brooding Byronic villain hero takes revenge on all who betrayed him by marrying and relentlessly tormenting Edgar’s sister Isabella (who represents in his eyes the bourgeoisie’s luke-warm satiety and hypocritical morals that prevented his union with Catherine). Catherine slowly wastes away because of wedding the wrong man. After her death Heathcliff seems to be losing his mind and grows obsessed with begging Catherine to return to haunt him so that they be can be together. (*“Ghosts have wondered on earth... Be with me always—take any form—drive me mad!”*) In this **double failed Bildungsroman** the lovers can finally unite post-mortem, as ghosts to roam their beloved, uncivilised moorland forever.

**Earthly reconciliation** may only come in the second generation of the family: a prospective status quo is promised in the scene when Cathy (Catherine and Linton’s daughter) lovingly teaches Hareton (the son of Hindley, Catherine’s brother, Heathcliff’s sworn enemy) to read and write, and hence suggests the possibility to rewrite one’s own destiny, to overcome the hubris committed by the forefathers, and to reach peace with oneself and others. Cathy and Hareton marry and inherit both Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange after Heathcliff’s death.

- ✚ The **symbolical significance of Nature/natural landscape** reminds of Romantic poetry’s **egotistical sublime** (where the frightening and fascinating scenery provides a pretext to reflect on one’s own psychological state) and the **regional novel** (in which the plot is fuelled by social-political, economic, or agricultural specificities and the peculiar atmosphere of the geographical location where the story takes place). Cathy’s and Heathcliff’s raging passions are mirrored in the stormy weather, the turbulent winds, the misty darkness, and the unfriendly, thorny, swampy, wild moorlands (a fictional Yorkshire moors). The gloomy **Gothic scenery** matches the troubled psyche of the characters maddened by love. Wandering in the moorland’s infinite, boundary-less territory, submerging in its **supernatural atmosphere**, offers a liberating break out of the claustrophobic prisonhouse of social expectations for the protagonists.
- ✚ Cathy’s and Heathcliff’s finally roaming the moorland as ghosts represents an **ecstatic pantheistic experience** clearly contrasted with the idyllic pastoral theme. Only Nature can offer a post-mortem consolation for what has been ruined by culture in life. “To be One with each other” implies to be One with the Universe, with Nature, and to worship this One-ness in every animate and inanimate thing, every cloud, tree, and rock. As Catherine says, *“My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods: time will change it, I’m well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal*

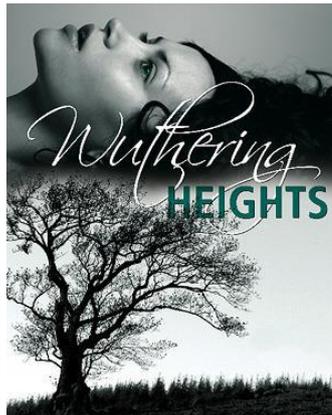
*rocks beneath: a source of little visible delight, but necessary. Nelly, I am Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being.*" Death, in that sense, is not tragic, it signifies a fading back into Nature, a return to this primary union, an embracement of the quiescence of fossils. As oddly bonded Gothic doubles, they both die of consumption (starving themselves to death, refusing a life without the other ("*Oh God! It is unutterable! I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!*")) Transcending beyond carnal sexual desire, theirs is a total spiritual union.

- ✚ Brontë explores the **psychological complexity of passion**: the combination of pain and joy felt over the recognition that the other is "more myself than I," and a resulting oscillation between hatred and adulation, phobia and fetishisation. In a turmoil of emotions, the desire to fully possess the other is complemented by a painful recognition that the beloved has a part of reality I can never get access to, and hence total fusion is impossible, as well as a fear of losing the "I" while fusing with "you" to merge within the communal union of "us". In this feverish story, passion is a matter of fate, lovers have no choice but to be together, even death cannot do them apart.

*I cannot express it; but surely you and everybody have a notion that there is, or should be an existence of yours beyond you. What were the use of creation if I were entirely contained here? My great miseries in this world have been Heathcliff's miseries, and I watched and felt each from the beginning; my great thought in living is himself. If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the Universe would turn to a mighty stranger: I should not seem a part of it.*

- ✚ The **pathological aspects of desire** are also explored, unveiling necrophiliac, incestuous, sadistic, narcissistic, infantile yearnings which like contaminating disease infect everything around them. ("*And I pray one prayer—I repeat it till my tongue stiffens—Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest as long as I am living! You said I killed you—haunt me, then!...Be with me always—take any form—drive me mad! only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you!*")

- ✚ These immoral subject matters (insanity, incest, domestic abuse, aggression) were typical of the **sensation novel** that deliberately set these shocking themes in ordinary, familiar, often domestic context to challenge the Victorian assumption that sensational, horrific events were foreign from comfortable middle-class existence. (↔Gothic horrors were mostly located distanced in the far-away and the long-ago) However, *Wuthering Heights* moves beyond the cheap thrills of the sensation novel by elevating passions into transcendental dimensions: Catherine's female rage surfaces in the foggy, stormy weather conditions, the ominous thunderstruck landscape, evoking an angry goddess shaking.



Genres evoked in <i>Wuthering Heights</i>
✚ Psychological novel
✚ Sociological/social problem novel
✚ Work of edification on nature of grand passion
✚ Failed double Bildungsroman
✚ Domestic fiction, failed family romance
✚ Ontological psychodrama
✚ Regional novel
✚ Expanded fairy tale tradition
✚ Gothic novel
✚ Ghost story
✚ Ballads, folk tales, legends
✚ Sensation novel
✚ Revenge tragedy

The motif of the **FALL** plays a vital role in the novel.

- ✚ Catherine and Heathcliff experience **the archetypal fall of the Bildungsroman hero**, but there is no place for resurrection, a cure, or a satiety terminating the quest.

- ✚ **The fall from innocence to experience: the trouble of maturation**

*"I wish I were a girl again, half savage and hardy, and free!"*

For Catherine (like for Maggie Tulliver in *Mill on the Floss*) her coming of age, her maturation from girl into woman is a tragic experience. The renunciation of her wild childhood self signifies a traumatic loss because becoming a civilized, engendered, self-disciplined lady implies not only the loss of freedom but also entails a painful breaking up of the primary union with Heathcliff. Her passionate temperament makes her unable to comply with Victorian expectations of submissive, docile, passive femininity; and her repressed rebellious past self, a bestial double revives and consumes her from within. (Heathcliff is also killed by "something from within," his own despairing desire for his lost soul.)

- ✚ **The fall from Hell to Heaven:** the move from WH to TG

- ✚ **The fall from Nature to Culture**

*Heaven did not seem to be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights; where I woke sobbing for joy. That will do to explain my secret, as well as the other. I've no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven; and if the wicked man in there, had not brought Heathcliff so low I shouldn't have thought of it.*

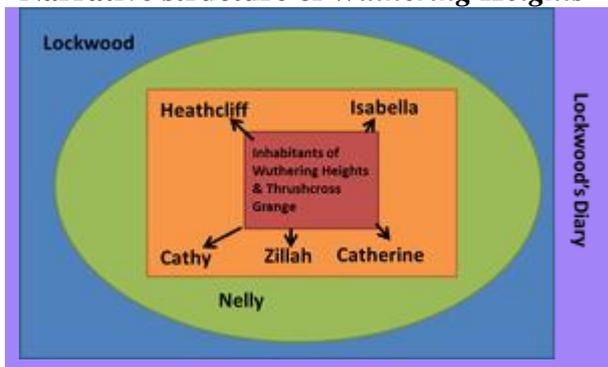
When Catherine marries Linton she moves to the neighbouring house Thrushcross Grange, a bright, beautiful, cosy, bourgeois domicile, that is the exact opposite of Wuthering Heights, a dark, cold, creepy, angry, unhappy place. However, the move from savagery to refinement, from bareness to wealth, the ascension from a lower to higher social class fails to satisfy her. She never feels at home in the heavenly surroundings of the gentle Linton family, and is tormented by homesickness for the hellish, harsh, unwelcoming environment of her prepubescent years. Catherine's illness caused by her leaving behind the wilderness also refers to the maleficent effects of civilisation.

- ✚ **Falling in love with the wrong man**

*It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now; so he shall never know how I love him; and that, not because he's handsome, Nelly, but because he's more myself than I am. Whatever our*

*souls are made of, his and mine are the same, and Linton's is as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire.*

### Narrative structure of *Wuthering Heights*



*Wuthering Heights* is remarkable for its complex, multi-layered narrative structure. The **nonlinear** storyline is disrupted by **flashbacks**, timeshifts, and the **retellings** of the same events from different characters' perspectives (Catherine and her daughter Cathy, Catherine and Isabella). The **double plotting** transforms domestic fiction into a gothic tale and vice versa. The novel employs a **frame narrative**.

In the present tense narrative time frame Mr Lockwood, a visitor to Thrushcross Grange asks the housekeeper Nelly Dean to tell the story of her landlord Heathcliff. Nelly is an **unreliable narrator** because she is old, forgetful, superstitious, gossipy, and sentimentally, nostalgically involved in the events she recalls retrospectively (twenty years later). Mr Lockwood's surface/outer narrative contains Nelly's tale that contains many other characters' accounts of the actions. Uncertainty permeates the story-world, because of the lack of omniscient narrator, the abundance of emotionally biased dialogues, and mysterious silencings. Several **gaps** are left in the readers' understanding: we never learn the origins of Heathcliff, how he got his money, if Catherine is really a ghost or not...)

### Comparison of two houses and their symbolical significations

	
<b>WUTHERING HEIGHTS</b>	<b>THRUSHCROSS GRANGE</b>
Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw	Edgar and Isabella Linton
Hareton	Linton
Wild raging of raw nature	Civilised politeness, cultured society
Darkness	Light
Functionalism, struggle for survival	Aesthetic decorations
Hellhound beasts	Lapdog pets
Natural freedom	Bourgeois Conventions
Oneness, Totality	Isolation
Hellish	Heavenly
Homely	Alien



**READING EXERCISE**

[Read 19<sup>th</sup> century reviews of \*Wuthering Heights\*](#)



## LISTEN

Click on the hyperlink and listen to Kate Bush's song inspired by the tragic love of Heathcliff and Cathy.



THINK

## TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE WITH A QUIZ BY CLICKING HERE

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/15c6Gpw5JtsK8Y\\_6GRi3tpxPBTz7LCgUhKLfO9s5nEzY/edit](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/15c6Gpw5JtsK8Y_6GRi3tpxPBTz7LCgUhKLfO9s5nEzY/edit)

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