

**A Student's Guide to  
Wuthering Heights  
by  
Emily Brontë**

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*Tu ne cede malis sed contra audentior ito.*  
—Virgil

Dedicated to

Cpl. William R. Ballenger  
RA 550 78 768  
1929-1955

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*No coward soul is mine...*

—Emily Brontë



Emily Brontë (1818-1848) was the daughter of an Irish clergyman, Patrick Brontë, who was himself an ambitious but unsuccessful writer, and Maria Branwell, a woman who was also a writer. She was the sister of two other writers, Charlotte (*Jane Eyre*) and Anne (*Agnes Grey*); two other sisters, Maria and Elizabeth and a brother, Branwell, completed the Brontë family. Born in Thornton, Yorkshire, Emily moved with her family in 1820 to an isolated parsonage in Haworth, Yorkshire, where she remained for most of her brief life. Her mother died at the parsonage in 1821 and a maternal aunt came to raise the children.

The sisters Maria and Elizabeth died at ages 12 and 11 respectively; as children, Charlotte, Emily, Anne, and Branwell began to write fiction at home, inspired by a box of toy soldiers Branwell had received as a gift. They worked at their imaginary “histories” of the soldiers until they were into their twenties; elements of these stories appear in their later works.

Charlotte went to school at Roe Head and became a tutor for Emily and Anne; in 1835 Charlotte went back to the school as a teacher and took Emily with her as a student. Emily, however, did not remain; she became ill and returned

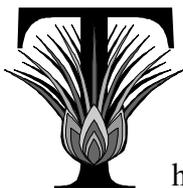
*Emily Brontë: A Biographical Sketch*

to Haworth. From that time on, except for a six month period of teaching in Halifax and an eight-month stay with Charlotte at Pensionnat Heger, a school in Brussels (Charlotte and Emily went for training; they hoped to start their own school in Haworth), Emily remained at Haworth Parsonage.

In 1835, Charlotte discovered some of Emily's poems and was impressed by their high quality; she then convinced her two sisters to collaborate on a book of poems, *Poems by Currer* [Charlotte], *Ellis* [Emily], and *Action* [Anne] *Bell*. These masculine pseudonyms, they thought, would be necessary to success; however, only two copies of the privately printed book were sold. But the *Poems* were a prelude to and in some ways an inspiration for the novelistic masterpieces by these remarkable sisters.

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* was published in London in 1847, appearing as the first two volumes of a three-volume set that included Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*. The authors were listed as Ellis and Action Bell; it was not until 1850 that an edited commercial edition was brought out with Emily Brontë's name on the title page. Emily's brother Branwell, to whom Emily was close, fell ill of alcohol and drug abuse and died in September 1848. Emily caught a cold at Branwell's funeral and did not leave her house again; she died there (of respiratory illness, perhaps tuberculosis) on December 19, 1848, not knowing that her novel would ultimately be considered one of the great works of fiction in the English language.

## Wuthering Heights: *A Synopsis*



he story is told by Nelly Dean, the housekeeper, to Mr. Lockwood, a visiting aristocrat, of two isolated Yorkshire families and their various relationships. The complicating matter for the Earnshaw family at Wuthering Heights is Mr. Earnshaw's bringing home a child, a boy, whom he claimed to have found in the streets of Liverpool. This boy grows up with the Earnshaw children, Hindley and Catherine, as an equal. Catherine becomes obsessed with Heathcliff and declares her love for him; Hindley hates Heathcliff. When Mr. Earnshaw dies and Hindley (the eldest boy) becomes master of the household, he relegates Heathcliff to the servant's quarters and treats him as a servant who has no family rights. Catherine will not marry below her station, so instead of marrying Heathcliff, she marries Edgar Linton, the son of another more sophisticated family from Thrushcross Grange.

When Catherine declares her intention to marry Edgar, Heathcliff runs away from Wuthering Heights; he returns mysteriously three years later with a large sum of money and the airs of a gentleman. Heathcliff gambles with Hindley Earnshaw, who has become a drunkard and somewhat mad since the death of his young wife, and Heathcliff wins all the Earnshaw money and lands; at the

## Wuthering Heights: *A Synopsis*

same time, Heathcliff attempts to reestablish his relationship with Catherine, who is now Edgar's wife. There is a fierce argument and fight between Heathcliff and Edgar, which ends with Heathcliff leaving to elope with Edgar's sister Isabella. Heathcliff marries her for property, not love. Isabella soon escapes from Wuthering Heights and moves to London, where she bears Heathcliff's son Linton. She dies when Linton is about twelve years old.

Just after the fight between her husband and Heathcliff, Catherine makes herself very ill and eventually dies after delivering Edgar's daughter, Cathy. Heathcliff is determined to have revenge on both the Earnshaws and the Lintons for his treatment at their hands; when Cathy comes of age, Heathcliff forces her to marry his son Linton, who is sickly and dies shortly after the marriage. Heathcliff has also reduced Hindley's son, Hareton, to the status of a kind of servant in the household at Wuthering Heights. However, Heathcliff cannot help liking the boy, despite his efforts not to do so. Heathcliff is finally emotionally unable to enjoy his revenge. Soon after the death of Linton, Heathcliff also dies and Cathy at the end of the novel is to be married to Hareton.



certainly, in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, the compelling relationship between the characters Catherine and Heathcliff commands the immediate attention of the reader. The entire novel is, in fact, structured around Brontë's powerful depiction of that relationship, and a perceptive reader must grant its central position in the work. The relationship, however, is not one of love, but one of almost complete self-obsession on the part of each of these characters. And an exclusive focus upon the Catherine-Heathcliff emotional axis, along with their numerous self-serving acts and casual cruelty may detract from other important and remarkable aspects of the novel. *Wuthering Heights* is indeed a novel of manners, offering the reader a rich and varied portrait of life in provincial English society during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The social setting of the work is one to which many current readers are unaccustomed.

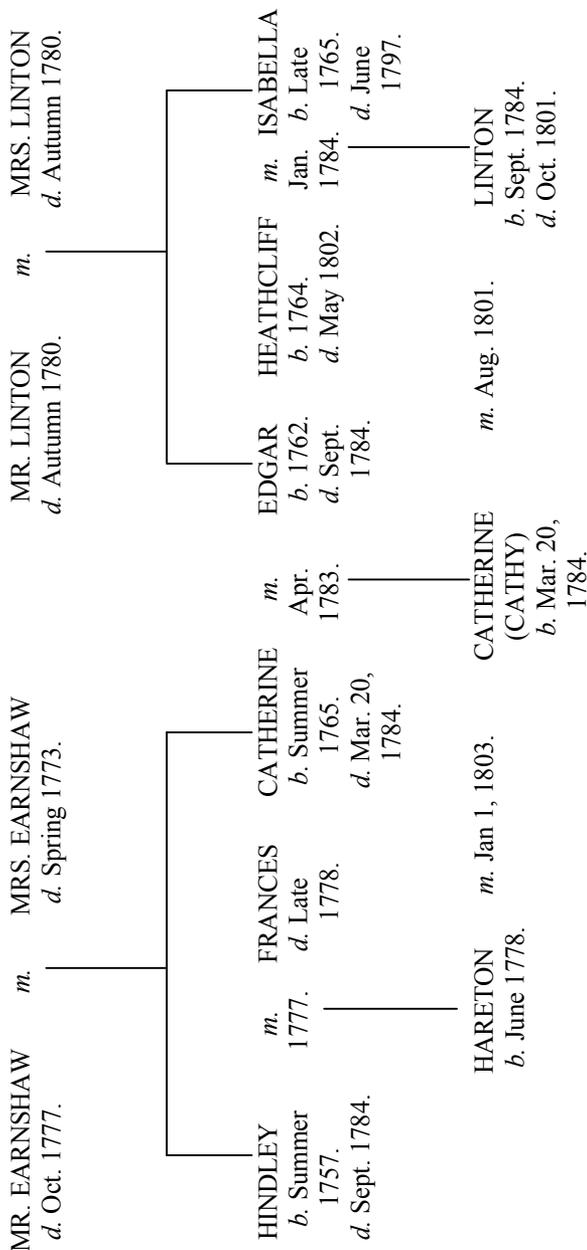
One unusual element of the novel is its use of several narrators. The narrator Mr. Lockwood tells the reader a story of the Earnshaws and the Lintons, one that he is told by another narrator, Mrs. Ellen ("Nelly" or "Elly") Dean, a servant to both families. Mrs. Dean sometimes relies upon

*Wuthering Heights: A General Introduction*

other characters to fill in parts of the “history” of the families and their relationships, thus introducing into the complex mixture a three-times-removed observer who may use an epistolary form or reported speech to add details that advance the plot. *Wuthering Heights* is a “frame-tale,” that is, the story of the two families within the “frame” of Mr. Lockwood’s visit to the Yorkshire district and his subsequent bizarre encounters with his landlord, Mr. Heathcliff, and with a ward of Heathcliff’s household, Cathy, to whom Lockwood, an unmarried man, is attracted.

The following diagram illustrates the formal relationships among the characters of the novel. Please note that young Catherine (“Cathy”) is the daughter of Catherine and Edgar and that Linton is the son of Heathcliff and Isabella Linton.

Wuthering Heights: *A General Introduction*



The Lintons (Thrushcross Grange)

**Mr. and Mrs. Linton** are the older generation; they die soon after taking care of Catherine Earnshaw. They seem to be kindly people who are members of the landed gentry.

**Edgar and Isabella Linton** are siblings; both children are spoiled and self-indulgent. Edgar marries Catherine Earnshaw and they have one child, Cathy. Upon his wife's death in childbirth, Edgar becomes a recluse. Isabella marries Heathcliff and then by law he becomes the owner of her property. She leaves Heathcliff and later bears his child, a son whom she names Linton.

**Cathy Linton** is brought up by her father after her mother, Catherine, dies in childbirth. She marries Linton Heathcliff, who is sickly and soon dies, and at the end of the novel, is to marry Hareton, the son of Hindley and Francis Earnshaw.

The Earnshaws (Wuthering Heights)

**Mr. and Mrs. Earnshaw** are the peers of Mr. and Mrs. Linton. When Mr. Earnshaw brings back the “orphan” Heathcliff from a trip to Liverpool, the reader is tempted to suspect the orphan is really Mr. Earnshaw’s illegitimate child. Mrs. Earnshaw never accepts Heathcliff, but Mr. Earnshaw dotes on him to the detriment of his legitimate children, Catherine and Hindley.

**Catherine and Hindley Earnshaw** are of the generation of Edgar and Isabella Linton. Catherine is obsessed with the “foundling” Heathcliff, and Hindley hates him. Catherine later marries Edgar Linton, but says that she truly loves Heathcliff. Hindley tried to make things difficult for Heathcliff when Mr. Earnshaw dies (he inherits his father’s fortune and position). He brings back to Wuthering Heights a wife, Frances, about whom he has never told his family.

**Heathcliff** (Earnshaw?), who is still a boy after Mr. Earnshaw’s death, finds himself in a precarious situation. Hindley Earnshaw, as the new master, hates him and has determined to make his life miserable. Just as Catherine is obsessed with him, he is obsessed with Catherine. After Catherine’s marriage to Edgar Linton, Heathcliff marries Isabella Linton in order to obtain her property. Their union results in one son,

## Wuthering Heights: *Cast of Characters*

Linton, who is sickly; Linton later marries Cathy Linton (who is “forced” into the marriage by Heathcliff), but he dies shortly thereafter. Heathcliff is a mysterious and brutal character who disappears for three years when Catherine announces her intention to marry Edgar, and he returns a rich man; no person could do such by legal and honest means. Heathcliff claims to live only for revenge; however, at the end of the novel, he simply loses his desire for vengeance.

**Hareton Earnshaw**, the son of Hindley and Frances, is first tended to by Nelly Dean, but later comes under the control of Heathcliff, who is determined to make him suffer for the indignities he suffered under Hindley. Hareton is finally saved from a brutal life (an uneducated life) by Cathy Linton, who first tutors him and then eventually marries him.

**Frances Earnshaw** is another character who comes from an unknown background; she is brought to Wuthering Heights by Hindley after his father’s death. She is an unsubstantial and rather silly woman who does suffer from “consumption.” Since she is so impressed by Wuthering Heights, she probably did not come from a socially acceptable family.

**Linton Heathcliff** is the sickly, spoiled, brutal, selfish, and cowardly son of Heathcliff and Isabella Linton. His one and only redeeming act is to help

## Wuthering Heights: *Cast of Characters*

Cathy escape Heathcliff's imprisonment so she can stay beside her father as he is dying.

### Outsider

**Mr. Lockwood**, a visitor to Yorkshire, is a person who has decided to spend a year outside his own social circle in London. He is intrigued by the characters he discovers at Wuthering Heights and implores Mrs. Dean to tell their stories for his entertainment. Lockwood is the primary narrator of the novel, and as an outsider, brings a measure of impartiality and objectivity that would not be possible for a participant in the events of the novel.

### Servants

**Mrs. Nelly Dean**, a servant to both the Earnshaws and the Lintons, is a major participant in the action of the novel as well as the secondary narrator. Her story *is* the novel, but just as her position in society moves her into the background, her narrative position is not primary. Mrs. Dean seems reliable, responsible, and intelligent (unlike the “generality of servants”); she is a well-educated woman through her own efforts. Since Mrs. Dean participates in the action of the story, her objectivity is sometimes suspect.

Wuthering Heights: *Cast of Characters*

**Joseph** is a hypocritical, garrulous servant at Wuthering Heights who thinks he has been called to provide “moral” instruction to other characters. A self-centered, self-righteous, dogmatic, superstitious man, he represents a very negative side of religious life.

**Zillah** is a brusque, no-nonsense servant at Wuthering Heights who replaces Nelly when Nelly is summoned to Thrushcross Grange. Zillah provides some information to Nelly regarding inhabitants of Wuthering Heights and is called a “lusty dame.”

Others

**Mr. Kenneth**, a medical doctor.

**Mr. Green**, a lawyer.

There seems to be a great amount of uncertainty in *Wuthering Heights* regarding the social class of certain characters. One should perhaps note that the ambiguity of social classes and the criteria for membership in a particular class is one of the major concerns of the novel. The characters in the outline below are especially appropriate to this motif of class structures because they are at one time or another members of both the lower class and the higher class.

---

Heathcliff:

Heathcliff becomes a “servant” for a time after Mr. Earnshaw’s death; he had previously been a member of the family with equivalent status. The legal master of the household, Hindley, relegates Heathcliff to the status of servant and removes him from the house. Later, when Heathcliff brings back his unexplained fortune, he becomes an aristocrat again (“Mr. Heathcliff”). He secures his recovered status by playing upon Hindley’s weaknesses and cheating him out of the estate. Heathcliff’s changes in fortune do not alter his fundamental attitudes and values; any changes in his character are superficial.

Nelly Dean:

Nelly is a servant who occasionally worries about being discharged from her position for displeasing her master. However, she is called “Mrs. Dean” and is given a somewhat privileged status. Mrs. Dean is certainly the intellectual equal of anyone in the novel; Mr. Lockwood, the truly aristocratic snob, tells Nelly, “Excepting a few provincialisms of slight consequence, you have no marks of the manners which I am habituated to consider as peculiar to your class.” (Note that Mr. Heathcliff also exhibits those “provincialisms,” though Mr. Lockwood does not mention them.) Later, Mrs. Dean also acts as the agent for Cathy Linton, who has not yet come of legal age.

Hareton Earnshaw:

Hareton is an aristocrat by birth. His father, Hindley, dies after losing his fortune and lands to Heathcliff. Hareton occupies a special position in the household at Heathcliff’s suffrage, but like a servant, he does not receive an education and he is put to manual labor on the estate.

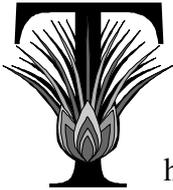
Cathy Linton:

After Heathcliff secures all of her fortune and property to himself as legal heir of both his deceased wife and son Linton, Cathy, who was an aristocrat at Thrushcross Grange, becomes a

servant in Heathcliff's household, certainly more specifically a servant with a servant's duties than Hareton. When Heathcliff dies, however, Cathy becomes heir (through her husband Linton) to Thrushcross Grange again, and she is the person to whom Mr. Lockwood must pay his rent. Upon Cathy's marriage to Hareton, her fortune and property will become his; he will then be the legal owner of Thrushcross Grange as well as Wuthering Heights.

Frances Earnshaw:

Hindley's wife is an aristocrat by marriage (as was legitimate in the society); however, she was probably not an aristocrat by birth. Marriage was the legitimate way to change one's social class; the idea of an aristocrat marrying "beneath" him was repugnant to the class, and evidently a good reason for Hindley not to tell his father or anyone else that he was married.



he social classes represented in *Wuthering Heights* are, for the most part, the rural landed aristocracy and their servants. There is mention of other classes—for example, of the tenant farmers to whom Heathcliff is a harsh landlord—but readers never observe them; neither do readers get to know many of the laborers on the estates. Similarly, readers do not see members of the middle classes, other than the doctor, Mr. Kenneth, and the lawyer, Mr. Green, who come from the town called Gimmerton, a place that seems to be ever glimmering just over the horizon for most of the characters in the novel. London, or even Liverpool, where one might indeed encounter industrial working class people as well as people from the aristocratic urban upper class, seem to exist in different worlds, apart from the inhabitants of rural Yorkshire. Mr. Lockwood, an aristocrat from London, is viewed with hostile suspicion by most of the other characters in the work.

The Lintons and the Earnshaws, families who represent the rural landed gentry, exercise enormous power over people from the lower classes in Yorkshire, both immediate legal power and the power of custom and tradition. The aristocrats hold government office (Edgar Linton is a magistrate, for example, though he gives up that

office) and have wide latitude in dealing with members of the lower class. The various punishments that may be administered by the aristocrats include corporal punishment, imprisonment, allocations of living space, job assignments, and discharges from employment that could render the servant completely unemployable. The servants owe respect to their “masters,” who remain somewhat aloof from them; they would address the masters properly (as Mr. or Mrs.); the servants would be regarded by the aristocrats as child-like beings who should be guided and corrected when necessary.

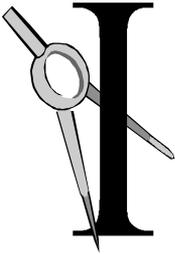
For servants to hold property or to have legal status within the system would suggest a breaking down of the social order, an introduction of chaos into the system. Mature men and women of the lower class were seen not only as child-like, but educating them beyond a certain limit would have been seen as misguided and even dangerous. It was the burden of the upper class to see to their welfare, just as under the system of European imperialism, it was the burden of the “whites” to look after the interest of the non-white indigenous people in other lands. When Heathcliff, as master of Wuthering Heights, does not see to the formal education of Hareton, he is refusing to accept his responsibility as an aristocrat.

Associated with these ideas of class structure was the matter of the status of aristocratic females, who were also thought of as child-like, frail, and emotional beings unsuited by nature to the rigors of intellect. Even though these women shared the status of the families and husbands, they had no voice in decision-making at any level, except as they could persuade their husbands or their fathers to listen. The

*Wuthering Heights: Social Classes and the Status of Women*

men held both broadly legal and domestic power over women, like the power they assumed over children and servants, and women were expected to submit to the wishes of the men who were their guardians. Women could not hold property separate from their husbands' holdings; when women married, the control of their property passed to their husbands.

In 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century England, women could not vote in elections and did not have legal status in society apart from their fathers or husbands. The system for inheritance of wealth and property was primogeniture, in which the eldest son received all or most of property upon his father's death. Trying to thwart Heathcliff's schemes to control both Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, Edgar Linton determines (at the end of Chapter 28) that he will not leave his daughter Cathy the property, but will rather "put it in the hands of trustees for her use during life, and for her children, if she had any, after her." Of course, Heathcliff counters Mr. Linton's desires by delaying the attorney with a bribe until Mr. Linton has died without making such a will. Further, the imprisonment of Cathy Linton and Mrs. Dean is not an excessively melodramatic or far-fetched incident; Heathcliff has a ready answer for his treatment of the two women. He is the master and they are females, subject to his governance.



In the novel, as in the society of late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century England, the legal ownership of property was often a perplexing problem. Women who were married, of course, did not own property; the title of anything they owned went to their husbands. In *Wuthering Heights*, the reader must also make a distinction between moveable property and lands. In some instances, lands were “entailed” so that they remained in the family and could not be sold; in certain other instances, lands could be mortgaged and lost if the mortgage was not paid. The laws were complicated, uncertain, and subject to manipulation by unscrupulous attorneys; a reflection of such confusion may be discerned in the novel.

It is not difficult to misunderstand the legal situation regarding the neighboring estates of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. There is no evidence in the novel, for example, to suggest that Thrushcross Grange is “entailed” property and that Wuthering Heights is unentailed, as some critics have claimed. In keeping with the structural balance of the story, both properties are estates of the landed gentry. Wuthering Heights is indeed a manor with tenants (Mrs.

Dean declares Heathcliff was “a cruel landlord to his tenants” in Chapter 18), as is Thrushcross Grange. And Heathcliff seems to have as much legal right to one as to the other—at least, according to Mr. Green, the corrupt lawyer. Mrs. Dean tells Mr. Lockwood that although Linton (Heathcliff’s son) could not, upon his death, leave lands to his father, Heathcliff could claim the lands in his wife’s name and his own. She adds, “I suppose legally.”

Mrs. Dean also raises a legal question when she muses to herself upon the birth of Cathy. She remarks, “I gazed out on the feeble orphan; and I mentally abused old Linton for (what was only natural partiality) the securing of his estate to his own daughter, instead of his son’s.” If indeed old Mr. Linton had left his estate to Isabella rather than to Edgar that might help explain Isabella’s resistance upon moving to a London suburb when she escapes from Heathcliff—by not taking possession of the estate of Thrushcross Grange herself, as would be her right, her living elsewhere might help deny her legal ownership of the property which would pass to her husband Heathcliff. Isabella tells Mrs. Dean that, “the Grange is my right home.” Later, when Isabella dies, Edgar worries that Heathcliff wishes “to secure the personal property, as well as the estate, to his son; or rather himself...”. If young Linton had title to the lands of Thrushcross Grange through his mother Isabella, rather than through his uncle Edgar, his claim, and later Heathcliff’s, would be stronger and would explain Edgar’s concern that Cathy’s “only prospect” of remaining at the Grange “in the house of her ancestors” would be to marry Linton.