
UNIT 5 *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*: ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS LATER

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we wish to make an appraisal of the many ways in which critics and readers have sought to analyze and interpret the novel since its publication almost one hundred and fifty years ago. As an Indian reader, at the end of the twentieth century, our understanding of the novel may be influenced by social and intellectual concerns that are of immediate importance to us. In the previous units we have discussed the various important issues that the novel engages us with and we have seen how it is possible to read between the lines and discover hidden meaning/s. Why does the novel stimulate the modern reader emotionally and intellectually? In this chapter, I would like to pose certain questions about the novel's relevance to us specifically as Indian readers. I would also draw your attention to some major critical approaches that are comparatively recent.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

On 19th September, 1854, in a letter to William Allingham, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, wrote of *Wuthering Heights* as a story in which 'the action is laid in Hell'. If Rossetti's 'Hell' is the conventional Miltonic concept of Hell — a place where evil reigns supreme then intrinsic to that concept is the notion of 'the fall'. As punishment for disobeying God, Adam and Eve *fall* from Heaven and become susceptible to the forces that may take them towards Hell. The fall is a lapse, a denial/disregard of the divine with the possibility of a collaboration with evil. In that scheme of things, Heathcliff is surely the central figure — for he is the one who emerges mysteriously as if created by some dark powers and for the most part, the novel is seen as the very representative of the devil seeking to wreak havoc on the seemingly pre-lapsarian world of the *Wuthering Heights* and the Thrushcross Grange.

In 1979, Sandra Gilbert wrote an essay on *Wuthering Heights* entitled 'Looking Oppositely: Emily Bronte's Bible of Hell'. Gilbert accepts that the 'fall' is central to the novel's scheme, but dramatically alters the Miltonic parable by invoking the *Blakean parallel*, 'This fall... is not a fall into hell. It is a fall from Hell into heaven, not a fall from grace (in the religious sense) but a fall into grace (in the cultural sense).' Pursuing a feminist line of argument Gilbert, in her essay shifts the focus from Heathcliff to Catherine and locates the problematic centred around the 'fall' in Catherine's passage from innocence to experience. From 'nature to culture'. We will discuss Gilbert's famous essay in detail, but at this point we ought to note that from Rossetti to Gilbert is a long journey in the criticism of the novel. This critical evaluation still goes on and the fact that we are studying the novel is proof that the novel still remains relevant and meaningful for us (in India) even after one hundred and fifty years since its publication in the middle of the Victorian Age.

5.2 CRITICISM OF *WUTHERING HEIGHTS* : AN ASSESSMENT

At this point, it would be pertinent to make an assessment of the history of criticism that concerns *Wuthering Heights*. Patsy Stoneman's Introduction in *Wuthering Heights : Emily Bronte. New Casebooks, Basingstoke: Macmillan. 1993*; and Linda H. Peterson's essay 'A Critical History of *Wuthering Heights*' in *Case Studies in Contemporary Literature, Boston : Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1992*, are useful for this purpose in the sense that they trace the history of the novel's criticism and direct us to important critical material.

The available critical material on *Wuthering Heights* can be chronologically divided into three phases. Criticism that emerged following the publication of the novel to the early years of the twentieth century may be called the early phase. Critics who claim the novel as an important work of art and scrutinize it without the constrictions of having to seek moral meanings or social messages in the text dominate the middle phase. The last phase, marked by the critical views of modern critics in the last twenty years, has been particularly exciting. Many of the questions asked by earlier critics and readers and many of the issues that had generated interesting debates are given fresh insights by these modernist critics equipped with sophisticated critical tools that they acquire from Marxist, Structuralist, Feminist and Deconstructionist theories.

Early criticism (pre 1930's) which is available in the Case Book Series edited by Miriam Allott acknowledges the work as powerful and views the novel as an extraordinary piece of writing by an extraordinary writer. The critics discussed at length the author's presentation of the 'evil incarnate' and the 'tragic and terrible consequences' of physical and mental violence in a social world where moral schemes are deliberately flouted. The mystery and the haunting quality of the novel and its powerful dramatic language were also commented upon. It was as if the author wished to communicate something intensely personal. Early criticism was thus preoccupied with biographical, historical and literary details that could be fitted into the novel. It was this form of criticism that linked *Wuthering Heights* to Byron, the French and German Gothic tales and of course to Emily Bronte's *Gondal* poems. In the *Gondal* Poems, Emily Bronte had created a fictional world of a fair-haired heroine who loves intensely but is fickle in her lover with several dark-haired heroes. This heroine and the heroes were seen by critics as the forerunners of Catherine and Heathcliff. Much of this criticism was moralistic. The coarseness of language, particularly in the profane dialogues, outraged many critics. Critics also pointed out that there was confusion and 'wildness' not only in the way the story was narrated but even in the moral positions of the characters. The critics struggled to find meaning of the text, specially the moral meanings they were looking for, which could conveniently coincide with their sense of social morality and justice.

This initial probing into the text, helped in the formulation of the many issues that concern the modern critic. By the first quarter of the twentieth century we encounter a new form of critical outlook. These critics were less bothered with the moral questions in the novel and were more concerned with the artistic achievement. For them the *text* was crucial and central, which they regarded as a work of art and valued it for the literary skills that went into its construction. These critics from the schools of New Criticism and Formalism felt that the incomprehensible and elusive quality of *Wuthering Heights*, its complex symbolism and imagery, strange characterizations and suggestiveness, were actually its strength, because the meanings, which were perhaps universal and timeless were skillfully hidden within the texture of the novel and the artistic ingenuity was the way the text teased the readers to discover for themselves these hidden meanings. Nevertheless, F.R. Leavis did not include *Wuthering Heights* in the Great Tradition of the English novelists. For Leavis, the novel was an 'astonishing work' but it was only a kind of 'sport', meaning that it was only a kind of personal indulgence and not profound enough to find company with novelists like Jane Austen, Dickens and George Eliot.

Ironically, it was during this phase of criticism that the novel was actually rehabilitated as a serious work of fiction. Critics worked out in detail how the novel was perfectly schematized in terms of time and chronology and how the narrative shifts give the reader a false but carefully devised impression of confusion. They pointed out Emily Bronte's impressive knowledge in legal matters relating to property and inheritance laws.² Lord David Cecil argued that the novel was artistically worked out within the cosmic principles of 'storm' and

'calm'. The conflict in the novel was not between 'right' and 'wrong' but rather 'between like and unlike'.³ Dorothy Van Ghent's famous study⁴ draws our attention to the recurring motif of the window in the text. The windows demarcate space in terms of 'inside' and 'outside', and also separate the 'human' from the alien or the 'other'. The tension in the novel arises out of the friction between two kinds of realities, one that is raw and natural and the other that is refined and cultured but restrictive and often unnatural.

As critics began to look into the text more carefully, particularly the way the narrative was organized, it became evident that the novel had more to communicate than just a haunting tale of futile lovers. In an analysis of the narrative, the reader's relationship with the two narrators, and the need to distance oneself from both was pointed out.⁵ The patterns of imagery interested the critics and they discerned how these patterns helped in the monumentalisation of human emotions.⁶ Yet another view point was inspired by Freudian psychoanalysis that interpreted the novel in Freudian terms of male and female sexual symbolism, the play of instincts and 'psychic energy' in the relationship of Catherine and Heathcliff.⁷

This phase is characterized by the abundance and multiplicity of interpretations that emerged out of close textual reading. Instead of concentrating on a single important message from the novel, critics articulated and demonstrated the richness and value of the text that lay in its multiple levels of meaning and suggestion. In this climate of plurality, Emily Bronte's life and times was viewed dispassionately and objectively. Instead of simply establishing biographical links between the novel and Emily Bronte's life, Marxist critics like Arnold Kettle and Raymond Williams⁸ point out how the text directly registers the disturbed and changing social, political and economic context of the mid-nineteenth century England and a certain authenticity may be discerned in the way the social conditions of the time are represented. The 'incompatible ways of life' and the social order in which men and women were treated as different and the presentation of an unjust social order with Heathcliff as a symbol of the oppression and degradation of the working class were issues that the early Marxist and feminist critics pointed out.⁹

With modern theoretical studies in philosophy, anthropology, linguistics and culture having made their impact on literary criticism, the last twenty years have generated a completely new kind of criticism of the novel. It becomes more difficult to label these critical interpretations and should be seen as a part of intellectual debates that the critics are engaged in from different and complex theoretical positions. These critics are chiefly influenced by what is known as Structuralism. Patsy Stoneman defines structuralism as a movement that combined linguistics with anthropology and showed 'that cultural behaviors of all kinds have a pattern analogous to language and that the meanings we find in these patterns are *socially constructed*'.¹⁰ Structuralism made a deep impact on the way one read a text. Since meaning was related to culture, the text signified more than just the literal meaning and literature of high quality and invariably engaged the reader in 'pluralities' or multiple levels of meaning. What distinguishes structural reading from the earlier critics was that the structuralist was not treating the text as a puzzle or a code that needed to be solved or deciphered. It was not as if the text contained some central meaning which once discovered would be something that everybody would accept and agree upon. Structuralists like Frank Kermode,¹¹ would prefer the text to be suggestive of many meanings and many possibilities of interpretation.

On the opposite scale, are the critics who practice Deconstruction which challenge the Structuralist approach. Inspired by the theoretical works of Jacques Derrida, the deconstructionist would posit that though the structuralist analyzes language and culture scientifically and objectively and examines how meanings are produced, there is always the possibility of making some sort of subjective value judgments by which one meaning is preferred over another. These preferences may make one go back to a central or core meaning of a text and thereby defeat the very purpose of opening the text to plural meanings. The deconstructionist denies any core, centrality or truth. By undoing the construction of meaning in essentialist and cultural terms, the deconstructionist critics have been able to open up the text for critics who wish to analyze the text in order to determine how various cultural patterns, prejudices, and preferences work into the text and how the dominant value system lies hidden in the text. In the present day context, the reading of *Wuthering Heights* is not simply the reading of a novel by Emily Bronte, but also goes into the reading is the reader's own cultural position as well as his/her knowledge/ignorance of the history of the way the text has been read and interpreted since its publication. The structuralists and the deconstructionists have definitely enlarged the scope of literary criticism.

Deconstruction is a post-structuralist approach. There are other post-structuralist approaches. Michael Foucault, the French historian theorizes on 'discourse'. Discourse is the accepted way of describing and evaluating experience. Foucault argues that power; social political and economic is maintained through 'discourse'. We can see how many 'discourses' are present in the text of *Wuthering Heights*. There is a religious discourse that draws upon the subjects of heaven, hell, sin, redemption and salvation. There is also a discourse on romanticism with its priority on ideal love and heroic isolation; and also the discourse on magic, myth and folklore. The purpose of discourse is to prioritize and centralize certain issues and marginalise some others. Discourse may run simultaneously but at crosspurposes with each other. The text of *Wuthering Heights* is used by post-structuralist critics to identify the many discourses, or voices¹² of the mid-Victorian society and to expose the contradictions and conflicts that arise as these voices are engaged in a dialogue. We have used some of these methods in our previous discussion on the narrative, and the characters of Heathcliff and Catherine in the earlier Units.

You will realize that present day critical practices use the text as an opening for an exploration and engagement with the society and culture that produced it and also with the one in which it is being read. Literary criticism does not stop at identification of social history, literary nuances and cultural patterns, but goes further ahead to probe into the nature of these patterns and nuances. For the feminist critic this probe is of great importance because it gives us the background to the ways and methods by which patriarchal society has been able to dominate and marginalise the woman's voice. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their suggestively titled book *The Madwoman in the Attic* draw our attention to how the woman writer struggles to resist the influence of the earlier writers and also suffers because she has primarily to prove that she too can *write*. Women writers in the late eighteenth century and the nineteenth century were actually breaking into a very male territory of authorship. As we mentioned earlier, in this book, there is Sandra Gilbert's famous essay on *Wuthering Heights*. Gilbert reads *Wuthering Heights* as Emily Bronte's myth about creation as opposed to the Christian myth of creation that Milton justified in his epic *Paradise Lost*. Emily Bronte's myth challenges the notion of the 'woman's secondness' that is central to the Miltonic myth. Gilbert argues that what the nineteenth century believed to be culture and decency was actually a Hell of male domination, authoritativeness and violence. It is into this Hell that Catherine falls. Gilbert draws our attention to the symbolic nature of Catherine's desire to possess a whip or a source of power and strength. In essence it is Heathcliff who actually becomes her strength against an authoritative father and later a brutish brother. The togetherness of their childhood, the sense of wholeness is broken with the visit to Thrushcross Grange. This is the moment of Catherine's progress from innocence to experience, from childhood to adulthood and also the moment when she loses her power. At Thrushcross Grange, in Gilbert's words, Catherine is 'castrated' not only by the way she is treated (made into a lady) but also by the way her alter ego (Heathcliff) is separated from her. This is the beginning of the woman's fall according to Gilbert. The denial of freedom and the binding of the 'hierarchical chain'. Since Thrushcross Grange represents civilized society and culture, ideologically something that is desirable and needs to be cultivated and nurtured, Gilbert's assertion that the change from Catherine Earnshaw to Catherine is a 'Fall'. This is a very strong feminist argument that exposes society and its values as essentially androcentric. What is interesting is that 'power' has been a word that has traditionally been associated with this novel. But with feminist criticism, 'power' shifts, and instead of locating it in Heathcliff and the wildness that is associated with him, it is now seen in terms of Catherine's desire for it and how it eludes her.

Gilbert's position is not the only feminist perspective about *Wuthering Heights*. Feminists have analyzed the novel from the perspectives of language and psychology. They have specially looked into the process of growing up, from childhood to adulthood and how during this process the woman is subordinated by the dominant culture and how some women like Catherine resist this subordination and how some like Cathy become a part of it. Some critics have also pointed out that the childhood innocence and joy that was 'lost' by Catherine and Heathcliff is to a large extent regained by Cathy and Hareton in the way that reverses their 'education' and the process of growing up.

Feminist positions and Marxist positions are often in the same line. Both discuss the society in terms of unequal distribution of 'power'. In the essay 'Myths of Power in *Wuthering Heights*'¹³, Marxist critic Terry Eagleton sees Catherine's choice of Edgar Linton as a compromise that drives both Heathcliff and herself to death. Catherine hopes to 'square authenticity with social convention' and that is not possible. Eagleton asserts that 'one of *Wuthering Heights's* more notable achievements is to demystify the Victorian notion of the family as pious, pacific space within social conflict'. Eagleton argues that because society is

restrictive and imprisoning, there is a need to escape from it. Thus 'escape to nature' is a part of the ideology that restrictive society produces. For Eagleton, Heathcliff is a representation of capitalist ideology. Through him the capitalist equation of the oppressed and the oppressor are enacted. 'His rise to power symbolizes at once the triumph of the oppressed over capitalism and the triumph of capitalism over the oppressed'. For Eagleton, Heathcliff is a conflictive unity of the spiritual rejection of an inhuman society and a social integration with the same society. This is what leads to his personal tragedy.

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5.3 THE DISRUPTION

In an essay entitled 'My Favourite Villain: Heathcliff'¹⁴ Muriel Spark in a richly personal style points out that whatever Heathcliff does 'is on a scale larger than life; if he lies it is not a petty lie, it is the sort of lie that brings ruin on some one's head; if he steals, it is the whole family heritage he steals — you couldn't imagine Heathcliff as a shoplifter.' Muriel Spark feels that it is Heathcliff who gives the novel its 'fiendish magnitude'. She also makes the important assertion that Heathcliff's influence is not merely at the physical level, in the sense that though he physically imprisons some of the characters, (Isabella, Cathy and even Nelly) it is actually his very presence that mesmerizes his victims. It is as if he is a 'moral hypnotist' who has the power of drawing 'strange, uncharacteristic passions out of people of his environment; whenever he appears there is not only trouble, but wild agitation, frantic behaviour and violence.' In short Heathcliff is a disruptionist. For people who are comfortable in a conventional way of living and thinking, full of artificial poses and gestures (like Lockwood) his presence is particularly disturbing. For a society that is conditioned by its own cultural, economic and ethical equations, Heathcliff's presence is seriously destabilising. There are political implications of this idea. When we consider that a society is composed of a set of relationships which is based on a certain distribution of political, economic and social power, then a disruptionist would, in a consequential way disturb the way power was distributed. In fact, the way the society reacts to the disruptions is as much a reflection of itself as it is the society's way of containing the disturbing influences of the raptures that the disruptionist creates. The apologetic tone of Charlotte Bronte in her introduction to the novel, specially about Heathcliff's moral character, clearly shows that she had seen the serious implications of the disturbances that Heathcliff was likely to create in mid-Victorian England. As a disruptionist, Heathcliff, who is in Spark's useful phrase is a 'moral hypnotist', would expose the hypocrisies, falsehoods and superficialities that exist beneath the veneer of moral authority. What Charlotte and many of her contemporary readers were not able to discern was that Catherine too disrupts many widely accepted Victorian codes and structures particularly those which created the logic of the woman's subordinate position in society. It is one thing to mythify and mystify Catherine as an individual who suffers because she responds to the prompting of her head rather than her heart, and it is quite another thing to see her as a woman whose life is a profound questioning of what the Victorian was proud to define as culture. Heathcliff/Catherine are in this sense, agents who *demythify* the Victorian age. To the modern reader, it is this 'disruptionist' and demythification aspect of the novel that makes an urgent and compelling appeal.

5.4 LET US SUM UP

To an Indian reader, Emily Bronte's novel opens up the contradictions of a society that sought to colonise the entire world in the nineteenth century. Its search for markets and cheap labour, its attempts at civilising the 'native', its introduction of industry and education in its colonies, its spread of institutions like the church and the judiciary, its morally superior tone is ironic. The Indian reader is also aware that the novel exposes an authoritative structure of society, much of which is malecentric and patriarchal. Such structures are not strictly British and these forms of patriarchal domination and social oppression also exist in our society. As students of literature we should be able to look into our own cultural context and our responses to it more critically. Finally, our reading of the novel, and our exposure to the multiple levels of meaning in the text may help us to question any assertion of singularity. We can develop a modern perspective to issues that concern us. Since we live in a society, which is culturally and linguistically plural, it is of importance that any assertion that seeks to negate plurality

must be seen with suspicion because it can be an assertion of authority and a denial of freedom.

5.5 GLOSSARY

- Blakean parallel* : William Blake (1757-1827), Romantic poet. Blake saw traditional Christianity as practised by the Church as oppressive in which God seemed to be disinterested in human affairs. So many of the conventional symbols associated with divinity and purity, like dew, stars etc. become negative symbols suggesting authority and suppression and rationality. The authoritative Godhead that Blake rebels against is for the feminists also a symbol of male authority.
- socially constructed : meaning of a word is constructed by the culture that uses it. For example the meaning of the word *night* is not only culturally defined but that words by themselves do not contain the essence of what they signify. The structuralist sees meaning being produced when one word is placed against its opposite. We know what 'night' is by knowing 'day' or what 'night' is not.
- Essentialist : the belief in core or centrality. opposed by the deconstructionists.
- Demythify : break the myth. Myth here is to be understood as a story which is basically a 'lie'. The society often produces such 'lies' in order to perpetuate power relations so that one section of the society may keep control of the other. For example, one of the 'myths' about people living in villages is that they are given to a more healthy living than the city dweller. Is this true? Are our villagers healthy?

5.6 QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think nineteenth century critics were engaged in locating a central moral or message in the novel?
2. What do you understand by the term New Criticism? What was its impact on the critical perspective to *Wuthering Heights*?
3. Do you think modern critical approaches make our understanding of the text more profound or do they simply confuse? Discuss.
4. Do you think there is a 'central truth' in the novel? Is there a need to arrive at a central 'truth'?
5. Do you think *Wuthering Heights* is a classic? Give reasons for your answer.
6. One of the major preoccupation of most early critics was to engage themselves in the search for a resolution or synthesis to the many contradictions that they encountered in the text. What do modern critics think about it?

5.7 SUGGESTED READING

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic : the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven, 1979.

References

¹ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven, 1979.

² C.P. Sanger's *The Structure of Wuthering Heights*, London: Hogarth, 1926.

³ David Cecil, *Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation*, rev. ed. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958.

⁴ Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel : Form and Function*, New York: Holt, (1953)

⁵ John K. Mathison, 'Nelly Dean and the Power of Wuthering Heights', *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 11 (1956).

⁶ Mark Schorer, 'Fiction and the Matrix of Analogy', *Kenyon Review* 11 (1949)

⁷ Thomas Moser, 'What is the Matter with Emily Jane?: Conflicting Impulses in *Wuthering Heights*', *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 17 1962.

⁸ Arnold Kettle, *An Introduction to the English Novel: Defoe to the Present*, rev. ed. New York : Harper, 1968

Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, Frogmore: Paladin, 1974

⁹ Arnold Kettle, *An Introduction to the English Novel : Defoe to the Present*, rev. ed. New York: Harper, 1968.

¹⁰ Page 4 Patsy Stoneman, *Wuthering Heights : Emily Bronte*. New Casebooks. Basingstoke: Macmillan. 1993.

¹¹ Frank Kermode, 'Wuthering Heights as a Classic' in Stoneman, Patsy. *Wuthering Heights : Emily Bronte*. New Casebooks. Basingstoke: Macmillan. 1993. page 39-53

¹² 'Voices' used in the Bakhtinian sense. Mikhail Bakhtin, Russian Critic who argued that literary texts are constructed out of many voices or discourses that are in dialogue with one

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another. Text could have one controlling voice, which would be mono logic, but in texts which are not controlled by one voice, the dialogic text, there is heteroglossia, or polyphony or a multiplicity of voices.

¹³ Terry Eagleton, 'The Myth of Power in *Wuthering Heights*' Stoneman, Patsy.

¹⁴ Muriel Spark. *The Essence of the Brontes*, Peter Owen: London, 1993.p.317-319.