

POINT OF VIEW IN *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*

Any serious discussion of *Wuthering Heights* must consider the complex point of view that Brontë chose. Lockwood tells the entire story, but except for his experiences as the renter of Thrushcross Grange and his response to Nelly, he repeats what Nellie tells him; occasionally she is narrating what others have told her, e.g., Isabella's experiences at Wuthering Heights or the servant Zilla's view of events. Consequently, at times we are three steps removed from events. Contrary to what might be expected with such narrative distance from events, we do not feel emotionally distant from the characters or events. Indeed, most readers are swept along by the impetuosity and tempestuous behavior of Heathcliff and Catherine, even if occasionally confused by the time shifts and the duplication of names. Brontë's ability to sweep the reader while distancing the narration reveals her mastery of her material and her genius as a writer.

To decide why she chose this narrative approach and how effective it is, you must determine what Lockwood and Nelly contribute to the story—what kind of people are they? what values do they represent? how reliable are they or, alternately, under what conditions are they reliable? As you read the novel, consider the following possibilities:

- Lockwood and Nelly are opposites in almost every way. (1) Lockwood is a sophisticated, educated, affluent gentleman; he is an outsider, a city man. Nelly is a shrewd, self-educated servant; a local Yorkshirewoman, she has never traveled beyond the Wuthering Heights-Thrushcross Grange-Gimmerton area. Nelly, thus, belongs to Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange in a way that the outsider Lockwood (or Heathcliff) never does. (2) Lockwood's illness contrasts with her good health. (3) Just as the narrative is divided between a male and a female narrator, so throughout the book the major characters are balanced male and female, including the servants Joseph and Nelly or Joseph and Zillah.. This balancing of male and female and the lovers seeking union suggests that at a psychological level the Jungian animus and anima are struggling for integration in one personality.
- Does Lockwood represent the point of view of the ordinary reader (that is, us). If so, do his reactions invalidate our everyday assumptions and judgments? This reading assumes that his reactions are insensitive and unintelligent. Or do he and Nelly serve as a bridge from our usual reality to the chaotic reality of Wuthering Heights? By enabling us to identify with normal responses and socially acceptable values, do they help make the fantastic behavior believable if not understandable?
- Does the sentimental Lockwood contrast with the pragmatic Nelly? It has been suggested that the original purpose of the novel was the education and edification of Lockwood in the nature of passion-love, but of course the novel completely outgrew this limited aim.

Nelly—as the main narrator, as a participant, and as precipitator of key events—requires more attention than Lockwood.

- To what extent do we accept Nelly's point of view? Is her conventionality necessarily wrong or limited? Is it a valid point of view, though one perhaps which cannot understand or accommodate the wild behavior she encounters? Does she represent normalcy? Is she a norm against which to judge the behavior of the other characters? Or

does she contribute, whether unintentionally, semi-consciously, or deliberately, to the disasters which engulf her employers? To what extent is Nelly admirable? Is she superior to the other servants, as she suggests, or is she deluded by vanity?

- Is Nelly's alliance or identification with any one character, one family, or one set of values consistent, or does she switch sides, depending on circumstances and her emotional response? Does she sympathize with the children she raised or helped to raise, a group consisting of Heathcliff, Catherine, Hareton, and Cathy? If Nelly's loyalties do keep shifting, does this fact reflect the difficulty of making moral judgments in this novel?
- Is her interpretation of some characters or kinds of events more reliable than of others? Is she, for instance, more authoritative when she speaks of more conventional or ordinary events or behavior than of the extreme, often outrageous behavior of Heathcliff or Catherine? Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes that although Heathcliff talks about himself to Nelly with honesty and openness, she persists on seeing him as a secretive, alienated, diabolical schemer. Is Sedgwick's insight valid? If so, what does it reveal about Nelly? Another question might be, why do so many people confide in or turn to Nelly?

There are two more questions that can be raised about the reliability of Lockwood and Nelly. The first is, did Lockwood change any of Nellie's story? This is, it seems to me, a futile question. I see no way we can answer this question, for there are no internal or external conversations or events which would enable us to assess his narrative integrity. The same principle would apply to Nellie, if we wonder whether she deliberately lied to Lockwood or remembered events incorrectly. However, it is entirely another matter if we ask whether Nellie or if Lockwood misunderstood or misinterpreted the conversations and actions each narrates. In this case, we can compare the narrator's interpretation of characters and events with the conversations and behavior of the characters, consider the values the narrator holds and those held or expressed by the characters and their behavior, and also look at the pattern of the novel in its entirety for clues in order to evaluate the narrator's reliability.

Symbol Clusters

Wuthering Heights

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| the Heights | • “higher” ground (irony); hell; wilderness; impoverishment, barren, isolated |
| the Grange | • “lower” ground (irony); heaven; Eden; culture; prosperity, greening valley |
| casement windows
(open/closed)
doors
gates
(locks/latches)
fences
boxes/enclosures
(Catherine’s bed)
crossroads
paths | • barriers; boundaries; limits; being “caged”
isolation
choices; transitions; directionality; passage of life |
| candle | • light; Truth
flash in the dark; transiency of life; impermanence
faith; love |
| books/letters
hearth/fireplace
schooling of youth | • culture; home; education |
| births/deaths
illness
graveyard
ghost | • life in generation; life cycle |
| dogs (rabid)
(horses)
birds (lapwing/nest)
leveret (a first year hare) | • aggressive, violent aspects of the personality; devil;
dark extremes
weak and helpless aspects of the personality
flight; freedom |

moors
dirt/mud
stones
Penistone Craggs
apple
flowers

- darkness; harshness; severity; rocky hardness
cold; marshy/wet; windy (masculine)
isolated; desolate
twisted dwarfed trees; prickly bushes; heather
- forbidden fruit; Eden
(feminine)

clouds
rain
overcast/grey

- life of the emotions; psyche

locket
violin
doll
last will and testament

- possessions and conflict

wives
daughters

Wuthering Heights

Definitions and Terms

Reliable and unreliable narrator - Reliable narrators are those whose accounts we trust whereas unreliable narrators may be partial, ill informed, or misleading. Most third-person narrators are reliable, but first-person narrators can be unreliable.

First-person narrative - A manner of telling a story in which the narrator appears as the "I," recollecting his or her own part in the events related either as a witness of the action or as an important participant in it.

Third-person narrative - A manner of storytelling in which the narrator is not a character within the events related but stands outside those events. In a third-person narrative, all characters within the story are therefore referred to as he, she, or they; but this does not prevent the narrator from using the first person "I" or "we" in commenting on the events and their meaning.

Omniscient - A third-person narrative which allows the author to relate the thoughts and feelings of all the characters in a godlike manner.

Limited omniscient - A third-person narrative which allows the author to tell the thoughts of only one character.

Objective View - A third-person narrative where the author is recording action from a neutral point of view.

Third-person narrative is the most common form of storytelling.

Romanticism - A literary movement that is frequently characterized by the following:

- settings that are in exotic or remote locations. Old castles or mansions frequently play a big role
- language and characters that are frequently marked by emotional intensity.
- an interest in the irrational realms of dreams, folk superstitions, legends, and ghost.
- a hero or heroine who rebels against the social norms of his society.
- an intense interest in nature and its beauty and/or fierceness.

Intrusive narrator - An omniscient narrator who, in addition to reporting the events of a novel's story, offers further comments on characters and events and who sometimes reflects more generally upon the significance of the story. It can be used for general moral commentary on human life.

Foreshadowing - The use of hints or clues in a story to suggest what action is to come. Foreshadowing is used to create interest and build suspense.

Foil - A character whose qualities or actions usually serve to emphasize the actions or qualities of the main character, the protagonist, by providing a strong contrast. *On occasion the foil is used as a contrast to a character other than the main one.*

Dialect - A distinctive variety of language spoken by members of an identifiable regional group, nation, or social class.

Dash - A dash can be used to show a break in a sentence, to emphasize a work, or to show someone's speech or thoughts are interrupted.

Metaphor - A comparison of two things that are basically unlike, in order to create a sharp picture.

Local color - A term used to describe an author's use of details and descriptions, common to a certain place.

Sarcasm - A cutting or contemptuous remark. Frequently false praise is used to put others down or make fun of them.

Byronic hero - A self-tormented outcast who is cynical and contemptuous of social norms and who is suffering from an unnamed or mysterious sin.

Frame narrative or frame story - A story in which another story is enclosed or embedded as a "tale within a tale," or which contains several such tales. Novels such as Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* employ a narrative structure in which the main action is relayed at a second hand through an enclosed frame story.

Willing suspension of disbelief - When the reader willingly withholds doubts about truth or actuality and accepts the make-believe world invented by the author in order to enjoy the story. Popular action/adventure stories frequently require this, as do classics like *Gulliver's Travels*. While modern readers of *Wuthering Heights* may be quicker to reject the possibility of ghosts, undoubtedly many Victorians willingly suspended disbelief in order to enjoy this novel.