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Teaching Emily Brontë's

Wuthering Heights

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by

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *Wuthering Heights*

W*UTHERING HEIGHTS* IS A NOVEL, often characterized as either a Romantic or Gothic novel. A **romantic novel** generally involves some or all of the following elements:

• the idea of **nature as a powerful spiritual force**

• **descriptions of the English countryside** (descriptions of the moors surrounding Wuthering Heights throughout the novel)

• a constant **elevated emotional level** and passion (Catherine and Heathcliff are in constant states of elevated passion during the story.)

• a desire to **rise above the limitations of ordinary human existence** (Heathcliff wishes to transcend life and reunite with Catherine in death.)

• a strong **interest in death** (Many deaths occur during the novel, and Heathcliff has an unnatural fixation on Catherine's death and corpse.)

• a **portrayal of opposites**, including escape and pursuit, calmness and turbulence, upper and lower classes, and suffering and peace (The two homes of the novel are opposites, Thrushcross Grange representing order and society, while Wuthering Heights represents chaos and savageness; opposite characters are contrasted, such as the passionate Heathclff and the meek Edgar.)

• **isolation**, both emotional and geographical (Both Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange are isolated geographically; Heathcliff is emotionally isolated.)

• **elements of the supernatural** (Catherine's ghost appears to both Lockwood and Heathcliff during the novel. After Heathcliff's death, others report seeing Heathcliff's ghost accompanying Catherine's ghost.)

Feminist Theory Applied to *Wuthering Heights*

Notes on the Feminist Approach

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY. Feminism in literature is an even newer area of study and thought. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The social movement of feminism found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts to reevaluate their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the "modern woman."

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes about women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing elements in literature that have been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that are clearly rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females should be added and judged on a different, feminine scale.

1. Catherine:

    • Catherine's visit to Heathcliff after dinner in Chapter 7

    • Catherine's arguments with Heathcliff and Edgar in Chapter 8

    • Catherine's discussion with Nelly about Edgar's proposal in Chapter 9

    • Catherine's treatment of Isabella when she learns of her feelings for Heathcliff in Chapter 10

    • The confrontation between Heathcliff, Catherine, and Edgar in Chapter 11, and Catherine's behavior afterwards

    • Catherine's final visit with Heathcliff in Chapter 15

2. Isabella:

    • Isabella's quarrel with Catherine in Chapter 10

    • Isabella's description of life at Wuthering Heights in her letter to Nelly in Chapter 13

    • Nelly's visit with Isabella in Chapter 14

    • Isabella's behavior during Hindley's confrontation with Heathcliff in Chapter 17

    • Isabella's escape from Wuthering Heights in Chapter 17

3. Cathy:

    • Her conversations with Lockwood in Chapter 2

    • The interactions between Cathy and Heathcliff that Lockwood observes in Chapters 2 and 3

    • Cathy's trip beyond the gates and her first encounters with Hareton in Chapter 18

    • Cathy's description of her trips to Wuthering Heights in Chapter 24

    • Cathy's response to Heathcliff during the kidnapping in Chapter 27

Psychoanalytic/Freudian Criticsm
Applied to *Wuthering Heights*

Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS "PSYCHOLOGICAL," OR "PSYCHOANALYTICAL," or "Freudian Theory" seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses solely on the text itself with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining the conflicts, characters, dream sequences and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is very similar to the Formalist approach to literature. One will further understand that a character's outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son's desire for his mother, the father's envy of the son and rivalry for the mother's attention, the daughter's desire for her father, the mother's envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father's attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level, to avoid breaking a serious social more.

- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory believes that dreams are where a person's subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and done in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly

• Chapter 9, p. 70-74;

• Chapter 12, p. 105-112;

• Chapter 15, p. 137-141.

For consideration:

1. What inner conflicts, repressed desires, and/or motivations does Catherine's dream in Chapter 9 reveal? What aspect of her psyche is at work in the dream?

2. Examine Catherine's motivations for and reservations against marrying Edgar. What characteristics of Catherine can you infer from her reasons?

3. How does Nelly relate to Catherine in these passages? What do you learn about Catherine from the way Nelly interacts with her?

4. Examine Catherine's focus on her old home and childhood during her illness in Chapter 12. What does it suggest about her desires and character traits?

5. What does Catherine's exchange with Heathcliff in Chapter 15 indicate about her expectations for death and the afterlife? What do these expectations reveal about her motivations during life?

6. Does Catherine change throughout the story? If so, how and why? If not, in what ways does she stay the same?

7. Consider Heathcliff and Edgar as extensions of Catherine's psyche. What elements of Catherine's psychological construct might each represent?

Activity Two

Analyzing Heathcliff's Motivations

1. As a class, define the following concepts often discussed in psychoanalytic analysis:

• inferiority complex

• displacement

2. Have students (independently, in pairs, or in small groups) examine the following key scenes and paraphrase or outline Heathcliff's statements.

New Historicism Applied to *Wuthering Heights*

Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as that culture really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the "truth" of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the "truth" is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the "losers" of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another culture is often lost to history because it is the powerful that have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict "traditional" (i.e., the winner's) history, there is no way to really know the ironclad truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it "reflects." To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of and change certain elements of that culture.

- the poor
- the elderly

4. What can be inferred from the treatment of these groups (or their absence) in the novel?

Activity Two

Examining Emily Brontë's Life and her Resulting Perspective on Life and her Culture

1. Copy and distribute: *Wuthering Heights* New Historicism Activity Two Fact Sheet:

2. Have students (independently, in pairs, or in small groups) examine the timeline and discuss the following questions:

   • How might each experience or circumstance of her life have influenced her viewpoints on life and her culture?

   • Are the viewpoints you inferred from the characteristics of Brontë's life reflected anywhere in the text of *Wuthering Heights*?

3. Be sure the students include at least the following five characteristics in their lists:

   • being the daughter of a clergyman
   • the death of her mother and two of her sisters by the time Emily was ten
   • the isolation her family experienced living in Haworth
   • the creation of imaginary worlds that she engaged in with her siblings
   • publishing her poems and first novel under a male pseudonym

Wuthering Heights: New Historicism Activity Two

Fact Sheet

• Born in Thornton, Yorkshire, in the north of England in 1818.

• Father, the Rev. Patrick Brontë, had moved from Ireland to Weatherfield, in Essex, where he taught in Sunday school. Eventually he settled in Yorkshire.