

Foreword

W*uthering Heights* is one of the most extraordinary novels ever published. When it first appeared under the pseudonym of Ellis Bell in 1847, most critics were baffled by it, and those who weren't were disturbed. Who was the author? Was it a man or a woman? And what had possessed him or her to write a story which, far from uplifting readers, left them feeling, as one put it, sickened and disgusted by its scenes of physical and emotional violence. At a time when most Victorian novels had a cosy moral agenda, *Wuthering Heights* was regarded as a dangerous book.

In the twentieth century, under the pervasive influence of the sentimental Hollywood film version, people's perceptions of Emily Brontë's great novel changed dramatically. No longer dangerous, it came instead to be regarded as the apotheosis of popular romance, with its passionate heroine running across the moors into the arms of its dark and handsome hero, played in the famous 1939 film by Laurence Olivier.

Readers who come to the novel for the first time today under the influence of Hollywood are in for a shock. Far from finding a conventional hero in Heathcliff, they will find a psychopath who gets sadistic satisfaction from acts of cruelty. Far from finding a conventional love story, they will discover that the relationship between Heathcliff and Cathy flies in the face of normal romantic expectations. Having been brought up as sister and adoptive brother, theirs is an incestuous sibling love rooted in childhood, and has little to do with 'normal' adult sexuality: it could never end, like that of Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester, in a happy marriage.

A further disturbing feature of the novel is the narrator, Lockwood, who introduces the story but seems calculated to induce feelings of alienation rather than empathy in the reader. Unlike Jane Eyre, who invites us into her heart, Lockwood is a

satirical figure, a bumbling fool who invites mockery and distaste. He is also cruel. Forced by heavy snow to spend the night at Wuthering Heights, he famously has a hellish dream in which he is so terrified by the ghost of Cathy that he viciously rubs her arm on the broken window pane until the blood runs down.

The Victorians were perhaps more honest in their response to the cruelty of *Wuthering Heights* than Hollywood with its rose-tinted spectacles. The original novel is indeed a shocking book, and not what you would stereotypically expect from the retiring daughter of a provincial parson in the mid-nineteenth century.

Over the years, biographers have been as baffled as the book's early reviewers, and some have even invented speculative – and unconvincing – tales of a real-life love affair to explain Emily Brontë's apparent knowledge of passion. But the key to *Wuthering Heights* lies less in its author's life experiences than in her reading. Though often thought of as living in a cultural desert in far-flung Yorkshire, the Brontë sisters were all in fact well read. Emily Brontë was a woman who lived more in her imagination than in the world, leaving her home in the village of Haworth as rarely as she could, and her imagination was fed by books.

Many of the strange qualities of *Wuthering Heights* have their roots in literary influences, though Emily Brontë transforms them into something entirely her own. The incestuous mutual identification of Cathy and Heathcliff – 'I *am* Heathcliff' is Cathy's famous cry – looks back to the obsession with brother-sister love affairs found in the work of Shelley and also Byron (the latter actually slept with his own half-sister). The novels of Walter Scott also lie behind *Wuthering Heights*: the use of local dialect, the unsentimental depiction of extreme psychological states, the characters' nature and animal names (Scott's *Bride of Lammermoor* features murder, madness and star-crossed lovers and has characters called Ravenswood and Ashton). The ghost scene comes out of German gothic.

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Wuthering Heights, then, is less romantic than Romantic. Rather than fulfil your fantasies, it will challenge and unsettle you, not least with the contrast between the chaotic emotions it unleashes and its taut control of language and narrative. There are no purple passages here, but understatement and sardonic humour. The double labyrinthine plot, with its tale-within-a-tale, is controlled with a mastery that suggests quite staggering literary intelligence. Emily Brontë was not the naïve wild child of legend but a writer of sophistication. She died of consumption, aged thirty, the year after publishing this, her only novel. It is indeed a troubling book – even her own sister Charlotte could not quite cope with its journey into the dark places of the psyche – but therein lies its power.

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