

***“Nelly, I am Heathcliff!”:***

**The Intersection of Class, Race, and Narration in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights***

by

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*To my dad for inspiring me to write this thesis as he did in 1982*



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## Abstract

Scholars of Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights* often analyze both Nelly's authoritative presence and Heathcliff's erratic behavior; however, the two characters are often discussed separately. This thesis places these two characters in conversation to highlight key moments where Nelly manipulates and interferes with Heathcliff. The thesis begins by situating the tensions between Nelly and Heathcliff in a historical context. Brontë wrote *Wuthering Heights* in the midst of a monumental social and cultural transformation: the Industrial Revolution. Higher social classes became more penetrable as earning potential rose and the middle class began to expand and prosper. Problematic social responses occurred as people began to feel threatened with the incumbency of the 'nouveau riche.' Within the microcosm of The Heights, Nelly Dean, the female servant for the Earnshaw family, is threatened by the arrival of Heathcliff, an immigrant outsider. Nelly uses her narrative authority to impose her biased opinions of Heathcliff on readers. Looking at Heathcliff through Nelly's narrative lens provides a new take on the intersection of class and race during the social transformations occurring throughout England.

Tracking and analyzing Nelly's narration illuminates how the Heights changes from a dark and depressing estate to the bright and flowery place with which we end the novel. Like England, the Heights experiences class fluctuations and uncertainty as its inhabitants attempt to return to equilibrium amidst changes provoked by the Industrial Revolution. This thesis concludes by considering some of the ways in which *Wuthering Heights* ends by prefiguring further social and institutional changes that occurred in England in the decades after its publication.

**Key Terms:** Wuthering Heights, Industrial Revolution, Unreliable Narration, Class Consciousness, Race, Gender.



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## Introduction

In an 1866 review of *Wuthering Heights*, *The London Post* claims that “the horrors of ‘Wuthering Heights’ are the horrors of a dream...and its tenants have the realism, the matter of fact moderation, and exactitude of detail of a police report.” *The London Post*’s remarks frame *Wuthering Heights* as a novel comprised of “horrors” so arduous they begin to occupy a fantastic “dream.” While this review notes the bizarre nature of the events in *Wuthering Heights*, it also commends the realistic personalities and actions attributed to each of the characters, or “tenants.” Perhaps it is the gritty personality of Heathcliff that motivates the “horrors” that *The London Post* and many other contemporary reviews find in *Wuthering Heights*. A small example of such horror is when Nelly finds a dog, Fanny, hanging on a tree near death by the hands of Heathcliff (Brontë 114).

What the reviewer for *The London Post* does not mention, however, is that the “realism,” the “exactitude,” and the “horrors” of Heathcliff and his actions are all framed by characters who seem to be invisible in *The London Post*’s account. The events of *Wuthering Heights* are narrated by a man named Lockwood who writes a story which has been told to him by Nelly Dean, the female servant to the Earnshaw family. Therefore, all observations of Heathcliff are seen through the viewpoint of either Lockwood or Nelly. Nelly, in particular, dictates the majority of Heathcliff’s story as her servant position gives her nearly unlimited access to the feelings and actions of characters. As an embedded narrator<sup>1</sup> and sole witness to much of Heathcliff’s behavior, Nelly has substantial power to affect how Lockwood and readers perceive Heathcliff.

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<sup>1</sup> Beth Newman regards Nelly’s narration as “embedded,” saying, “the novel [*Wuthering Heights*] also ties the gaze inextricably to the signifier, the process of narration producing the signified, the theme and ‘content.’ It does so in three ways: through its extradiegetic frame (Lockwood’s diary entry), and the many metadiegetic embeddings within Nelly’s narrative...” (Newman 1033).

While both Victorian reviewers and modern scholars have talked about the “horrors” of Heathcliff and the influence of Nelly, they are largely discussed as unrelated. Bruce Robbins writes in his book, *The Servant’s Hand: English Fiction from Below*, that Nelly is “ascribed power” through her narration, but does not discuss the implications of her “power” over characters in the novel (Robbins 104). In *The English Novel: Form and Function*, Dorothy Van Ghent talks about how “the unregulated universe” in *Wuthering Heights* creates characters that are “devoid of civilized habits” (Van Ghent 153-154). Van Ghent takes a keen focus on how the unregulated nature of the novel creates Heathcliff’s uncivilized behavior, but does not note how the narration frames such behavior. This thesis addresses this gap.

This is certainly not the first thesis that examines Nelly’s narration in relation to Heathcliff. However, this thesis is interested in exploring the impact of Nelly’s narrative manipulations on reader perceptions of Heathcliff. Therefore, this thesis will build on the work of critics who focus on Nelly and Heathcliff as largely separate forces in the novel, and combine their insights with an analysis of Nelly’s narrative techniques to better understand the reasons behind Brontë’s choice to focus on these two socially marginalized protagonists: Heathcliff the outcast, and Nelly the servant. This analysis argues that Nelly’s characterization of Heathcliff’s actions illuminates the motivations a female servant might have had to negatively influence reader perceptions of Heathcliff.

Nelly observes Heathcliff’s entry into the Earnshaw family as a threat to her position as Catherine’s trusted servant, and therefore begins to undermine Heathcliff’s character. Heathcliff’s incumbency threatens Nelly’s position and illustrates what many people in England felt during the early 1800’s because of the changing social structures provoked by the Industrial Revolution. Nelly’s narrative manipulation illustrates how the fictional world of *Wuthering*

*Heights* identifies social complexities that were occurring in England as a result of the Industrial Revolution. While many scholars have explored various ways to look at Heathcliff and Catherine, this thesis urges readers to use Nelly's narration as a way to examine what the story tells us about historical social conditions during the time of Emily Brontë.

To understand the characters living in the contained, fictional world of *Wuthering Heights*, it is first important to note that while *Wuthering Heights* was written in the 1840's, its fictional events take place in the very early 1800's in the midst of the Industrial Revolution. Normative societal structures in England were being overturned. As historian Harold Perkin describes, England transitioned from a vertically integrated society in which upper and lower classes felt bound to each other, to a horizontally stratified society in which individuals felt more allied to their own class than to others (Perkin). This was the period that historian E.P. Thompson famously called "The Making of the English Working Class." At the same time that the working class was becoming conscious of its united grievances, the rising middle class consolidated its economic, social, and political power (Thompson). According to estimates by economist N.F.R Crafts, British income per capita rose from \$400 in 1760 to \$500 in 1830, then jumped to \$800 in 1860; income per person increased by 100% between 1760 and 1860 (Nardinelli). A majority of that increased income went towards the middle class (Nardinelli). The plethora of employment opportunities and subsequent prosperity of the middle class also drew immigrants to England. Many of these immigrants settled in city centers such as London, Liverpool, and other industrial towns (Churchill). Liverpool was particularly known as an immigrant point of entry to England and departure to North America due to its transatlantic routes ("Liverpool and Emigration in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries"). While there are not precise records of 19th century European immigration levels, it is estimated that between 1830 and 1930,

over nine million people passed through Liverpool to settle in England or move on to destinations such as Australia, America, and Canada (“Liverpool and Emigration in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries”). As we shall see, Liverpool plays an important role in *Wuthering Heights* because it is the town where Mr. Earnshaw finds Heathcliff as a young starving boy in the streets. Liverpool was also the center of the British slave trade right up to its abolition in 1807, 36 years after Mr. Earnshaw finds Heathcliff (“Liverpool and the Transatlantic Slave Trade”). As Lisa Von Sneidern argues in “*Wuthering Heights* and the Liverpool Slave Trade,” “Heathcliff’s racial otherness cannot be a matter of dispute; Brontë makes that explicit” (Von Sneidern 172). Liverpool is the location where readers are first introduced to the long-lasting implications of Mr. Earnshaw’s adoption of a foreign, dark featured “devilish” boy.

The first chapter of this thesis examines how *Wuthering Heights* portrays the social transformation provoked by the Industrial Revolution. The social and class changes occurring at that time help to explain the pervasive racism and inequality that excluded colored immigrants such as Heathcliff. The abolition of slavery and the Industrial Revolution challenged the traditional eighteenth and nineteenth century British yeoman family structure, a family that owned a small landed estate (“Yeoman, n.”). The Earnshaw family experiences many of these challenges when Heathcliff arrives. Heathcliff also experiences challenges and limitations in the Earnshaw family; and to better represent these limitations, the term “gentility” is used. This word is commonly employed by *Wuthering Heights* scholars<sup>2</sup> and is used in this chapter to establish how Heathcliff’s immigrant status and lack of gentility exclude him from social spaces in the novel. This chapter demonstrates the many historical parallels between the exclusion of Heathcliff and Britain’s transition from a primarily agrarian economy and society to an industrialized society with both greater social divisions and greater upward economic mobility.

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<sup>2</sup> Terry Eagleton and Q.D. Leavis use this term to discuss *Wuthering Heights*



The second chapter explores why readers and critics frequently overlook Nelly's impact as a narrator. Contemporary critics and readers are so wrapped up in Heathcliff's "devilish" and "barbaric" characteristics, that they fail to notice how Nelly manipulates Heathcliff's character and story. Both contemporary reviews of *Wuthering Heights* and Charlotte Brontë's posthumous preface to her sister's novel are used to demonstrate why Nelly's narration is overlooked. This chapter illustrates how the extraordinary focus on Heathcliff has been made at the expense of exploring the impact of Nelly as narrator.

The third chapter identifies and explores textual examples where Nelly manipulates the narration of Heathcliff to present him in a more negative light. Nelly establishes a binary opposition between her social standing in the Earnshaw family and Heathcliff's immigrant status. The juxtaposition between her own marginalized class and Heathcliff's immigrant class illuminates the threat felt by the lowest social class with the destabilization of the strict class structure of the time. This chapter moves through textual examples of Nelly manipulating Heathcliff's words to Lockwood, and argues that Nelly is personally motivated to set herself in a good light and subvert opinions of Heathcliff both in the Earnshaw family and in Lockwood's eyes. Textual evidence from *Wuthering Heights* shows that Nelly does in fact manipulate Heathcliff's character, and suggests that she does so because of the threat she perceives to her social position.

After examining the ways in which Nelly is historically motivated to further marginalize Heathcliff, this thesis concludes by considering *Wuthering Heights* as a socially progressive novel that looks forward to monumental institutional changes that were about to occur in England. To mitigate any confusion surrounding naming conventions for characters in *Wuthering*

*Heights*, this thesis refers to Catherine Earnshaw Linton as ‘Catherine,’ and Catherine Earnshaw Linton and Edgar Linton’s daughter as ‘Cathy.’

This thesis brings together a narratological focus with an intersectional emphasis on the interactions of class and race. As defined by Maureen Kentoff “Intersectionality is an approach to literary analysis that invites students to consider how a range of identity factors, such as gender, race, nationality, class, sexuality, age, physical ability, corporeality, role, or setting, interact to shape character” (Kentoff 66). There are a multitude of factors that shape reader perceptions of Heathcliff, and this thesis explores how class and race interact to shape Nelly’s negative narration of Heathcliff as well as why her narration many times goes unnoticed. The narratological focus of this thesis centers on the unreliable narration of Nelly.

Wayne C. Booth first coined the term “unreliable narrator” in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Peter J. Rabinowitz later critiqued and modified Booth’s definition in his book *Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences* to say:

An unreliable narrator... is not simply a narrator who 'does not tell the truth' – what fictional narrator ever tells the literal truth? Rather an unreliable narrator is one who tells lies, conceals information, misjudges with respect to the narrative audience – that is, one whose statements are untrue not by the standards of the real world or of the authorial audience but by the standards of his own narrative audience. (Rabinowitz 134)

Nelly fits Rabinowitz’s description of “the unreliable narrator” in her “misjudg[ment]” and “lies” about Heathcliff. Nelly also fits some of the specific modes of unreliability that narratologist James Phelan proposes in his book *Living to Tell About it*. For example, she fits his description of ‘misreporting’, which “involves unreliability at least on the axis of characters, facts, and

events” (Phelan 51). Nelly also fits Phelan’s mode of ‘misreading,’ which “involves unreliability at least on the axis of knowledge/perception” (Phelan 51).

This thesis aims to demonstrate how Nelly’s defensive and manipulative narration of Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* can be used to understand not only Heathcliff’s ‘disturbing’ behavior but also how the Heights acts as a commentary on England’s changing social landscape. As a final thought, this thesis considers the ways in which *Wuthering Heights* looks forward to social and institutional changes in England, and why that would not be possible without first exploring Nelly’s unreliable, biased narration.



**Chapter One – A Society in Transition: The impact of the Industrial Revolution on  
*Wuthering Heights***

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* begins in 1801, a time when the rising industrial working class and eventual abolition of slavery began disrupting the British class system and traditions, including the yeoman family, a family that owned a small landed estate ("Yeoman, n."). Brontë illustrates and explores these disruptions by setting the novel at a country estate where an immigrant outsider is brought into a traditional patriarchal family and servant class structure. Brontë narrates the story through the eyes of Nelly, a well-educated servant, and Lockwood, a wealthy man who rents a neighboring country estate to escape London society. The author's decision to select a female servant narrator underscores the social disruption Heathcliff causes. As a female servant and member of a largely marginalized class in England, Nelly is particularly susceptible to the social disruptions the Industrial Revolution induced<sup>3</sup>. Nelly is acutely aware of the potential threat that Heathcliff poses to her servant position, which is perhaps what motivates her defensive and vigilant demeanor towards Heathcliff.

The Industrial Revolution created new opportunities for wealth and jobs, which facilitated the rise of the middle class in England. While there were greater financial opportunities available, racist and elitist attitudes continued to exclude dark skinned immigrants like Heathcliff from achieving social equality. This chapter first explores why Brontë might have been motivated to set *Wuthering Heights* during a time of social instability as Britain transitioned from a primarily agrarian economy and society to an industrialized society with greater upward

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<sup>3</sup> Harold Perkin notes in his book *The Origins of Modern English Society 1780-1880*, "During the nineteenth century population and real income quadrupled. Such a rise in the scale of life required, involved and implied drastic changes in society itself...Culture and civilization were not possible in the pre-industrial world without exploitation, of slaves, serfs, or the 'labouring poor'. Though industrialism in the short run increased the possibility and perhaps the degree of exploitation, in the long run it abolished the necessity" (Perkin 4-5).

economic mobility. Subsequently, it illustrates the narrative implications of the Industrial Revolution on the opportunities and limitations of Heathcliff, a dark-skinned immigrant.

Brontë was no stranger to the changing social landscape of eighteenth and nineteenth century England. Brontë is motivated to show the social changes sparked by the Industrial Revolution because she was both a participant and witness to that social change. Indeed, facing the general social complexities of the time, Brontë's own social standing was ambiguous, because she did not have the protection of either class or money. Brontë was the daughter of a life-long curate-level Anglican priest from Haworth, a town that grappled with the changing social landscape (Ingham). According to Terry Eagleton in his study *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës*, Brontë "lived in a region where there was a sharp and complicated conflict between landed and industrial capital" (Eagleton 8). Living in a region with such "complicated conflict," Brontë was a firsthand witness to the tensions that arose when industrial capital challenged normative "landed" or Yeoman families. Brontë experienced anxiety and eating disorders, and some scholars have drawn connections between Brontë's vacillating social class and her well-documented conditions<sup>4</sup> (Eagleton, Ingham).

Brontë also worked several years as a governess educating upper-class children, and thus was a first-hand witness to the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the British upper class and its servants. Brontë essentially played the role of a high-class servant herself, serving as a governess for high-class families<sup>5</sup>. Brontë's experience as a 'servant' may have motivated her choice to use Nelly's character as a narrator. Eagleton claims that "becoming a governess meant

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<sup>4</sup> Patricia Ingham states in her biography that "...Emily found the separation from home and family painful, but in her case it proved too painful to endure. She underwent some kind of physical-psychological collapse...It is this episode that has led to the suggestion that Emily intermittently showed symptoms of anorexia..." (Ingham 13).

<sup>5</sup> Susan Zlotnick argues that Brontë played a role similar to that of a servant in "What do the Women Do?"

moving into a higher social circle, as well as a glad opportunity to exercise one's intellectual talents; but it also meant entering that desirable society precisely as a servant, as socially subservient to the very men and women to whom one felt culturally superior" (Eagleton 10). Being a governess meant that Brontë lived and socialized with families in the highest social ranks of England. However, she would only have been allowed to enter this upper class world as an observer rather than as a participant. Due to Brontë's position, she was still treated as "socially subservient" to the family members. It is therefore necessary to consider that Brontë may have been writing drafts of *Wuthering Heights* after having experienced the social injustice of being looked down upon as subservient to a family that she felt "culturally superior" to. Brontë's "subservient" experience is perhaps reflected in her casting of Nelly as a female servant narrator. Brontë casts Nelly as an educated servant who also feels superior to other servants in the house<sup>6</sup>.

In *Wuthering Heights* and in Brontë's own life, just as educators were often viewed as servants, servants often served as educators. Nelly many times plays the role of educator in the Earnshaw children's lives, much as Brontë would have acted as a governess in upper class families. Furthermore, Bruce Robbins claims that "English novelist were raised by servants and witnessed the separations that took place" (Robbins 106). Brontë herself was raised by a servant named Tabitha Ackroyd, who was a servant for the family for thirty years (Robbins 105). Using Tabitha as a guide, Brontë had access to the behaviors and duties of a female servant, and had the knowledge to accurately cast a female servant like Nelly as the narrator. Brontë narrates her novel from a point of view that she likely related to on a personal level. She uses Nelly to narrate

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<sup>6</sup> This is expanded upon in Chapter Three, but in *Wuthering Heights*, Nelly frequently states her superiority to Joseph and Zillah, two other servants at the Heights.

the many social vacillations that occurred throughout the Industrial Revolution, some of which she experienced herself.

Brontë begins the novel with an explicit mention of the historical era in which it is set to cue the reader that it is essential to be aware of time, and how the novel develops with it. In fact, the first sentence of the book is “1801” (Brontë 1). Historian Carolyn Steedman makes a particularly keen observation in her book, *Master and Servant*, that Brontë plays close attention to the dates and times of events that occur in the novel (Steedman 200). The close attention that Brontë plays to dates appears multiple times throughout the novel. Discussing these frequent references to time, Anita Levy argues that “The novel functions as an agent of history, rewriting and redefining history itself” (Levy 94). Levy claims that the Heights “clearly” vacillates between pre and post Industrial modes and “is clearly represented as the mediation between one historical moment and the next” (Levy 83). Levy’s assertion further supports my claim that Brontë sets the novel from 1757-1801 in order to illustrate the changes that occurred during the Industrial Revolution.

Heathcliff’s entrance into the traditional, patriarchal Earnshaw family illustrates some of the challenges that occurred when traditional landed families were faced with new entrants into their established family structure. This has not escaped the attention of scholars. Q.D. Leavis studies *Wuthering Heights* through the lens of a socioeconomic novel, and claims that,

The point about dating this novel as ending in 1801...is to fix its happenings at a time when the old rough farming culture based on a naturally patriarchal family life, was to be challenged, tamed and routed by social and cultural changes. (Leavis 237)

Leavis’s explanation of “old rough farming culture” and “patriarchal family life” being under siege well describes *Wuthering Heights*. Led by Mr. Earnshaw, the Earnshaw family is largely



self-sufficient. They raise their own animals for meat and milk, there is minimal mention of visits to town, and there are extensive descriptions of the manual work performed by servants like Joseph. At the beginning of the novel, the Earnshaw family displays a “rough farming culture,” but after the “challeng[ing]” and “tam[ing]” changes occur, the physical labor needed to maintain the Heights is no longer discussed, and the Heights appears considerably more charming. By the end of the novel, these “tam[ing]” changes that have occurred to the Heights are obvious to Lockwood, who “neither had to climb the gate nor to knock - it yielded to my hand. That is an improvement, I thought. And I noticed another, by the aid of my nostrils; a fragrance of stocks and wallflowers wafted on the air...” (Brontë 273). Upon his return, Lockwood notes many improvements such as no longer having to “climb the gate” and having a nice flowery “fragrance” – features that make the heights a less “rough” place to live. The Earnshaw family’s cultural shift from “rough” to “tame” is one of the methods that Brontë employs to demonstrate social change in *Wuthering Heights*.

There are many challenges that the Earnshaw family endures to progress from “rough” to “tame,” and Heathcliff’s arrival is one of the chief challenges. Heathcliff is introduced to the family by the head patriarchal figure, Mr. Earnshaw; his arrival immediately challenges and changes the family and servant dynamic. There are many examples of the family resisting the entrance of Heathcliff that will be further explored in Chapter Three of this thesis. At this point, however, this chapter focuses on the pervasive racist and classist attitudes that exclude Heathcliff from entering social spaces in the novel. Just as the traditional English family was challenged by the Industrial Revolution, so were the immigrants that came to England for its opportunities.

Scholars commonly regard the term ‘gentility’ as marking elite society’s racial and class exclusivity; this term encapsulates much of Heathcliff’s challenging experience with the

Earnshaw family. Though not used in *Wuthering Heights*, 'gentility' is a frequent reference in scholarship about the novel (Eagleton, Leavis). The Oxford English Dictionary cites the earliest use of the term in 1340: 'gentility' refers to a social superiority that is demonstrated through gentle manners, behavior, appearance, and belonging to a family of gentle blood ("Gentility, n."). The meaning of the word 'gentility' is heavily clouded with racial undertones that prevent certain races from obtaining 'gentility' to its fullest. The base definition of the word is racially exclusive as the 'social superiority' is rooted in belonging to a family of 'gentle blood.' This definition inherently excludes others than the white elite, who were born into 'gentle blood.' While the increased upward economic mobility created by the Industrial Revolution began to transform previously well-understood notions of 'gentility' to something that could be partially obtained with wealth, it still maintained its racial exclusivity.

Q. D. Leavis uses the term 'gentility' to illustrate the pre-industrial class-consciousness and limited opportunities that existed for outsiders prior to the Industrial Revolution. She asserts that "cultural changes" produced "the Victorian class consciousness and 'unnatural' ideal of gentility" (Leavis 237). Leavis claims that there is an 'unnatural ideal' of class consciousness that developed alongside the cultural changes of the Industrial Revolution. Not all scholars agree (Eagleton, Robbins). While the Industrial Revolution certainly created a threat to the existing social order and caused people to become defensive of their social standing, there is a historical precedent of class-consciousness that existed prior to the Industrial Revolution. The importance of class and rank in England dates back to prehistoric society when there was a shift from hunter-gatherer lifestyles to farming, which developed a division of labor and "deep class divisions" (Diamond). From this division of labor grew the idea of the ruler versus the workers, and class consciousness can be traced back to primitive social organizations where people were defensive

and protective of their food and class position (Diamond). The “unnatural gentility” that Leavis claims developed with the Industrial Revolution is actually a trait that was revered prior to the Industrial Revolution. While ‘gentility’ is not a new phenomenon, other historians, such as E.P. Thompson and Harold Perkin, back up Leavis’s claim that the nature of class consciousness and class antagonism was qualitatively different post-Industrial Revolution. In *Wuthering Heights*, Brontë captures these adaptations.

Moreover, *Wuthering Heights* explores the intersection of class and race within a changing social landscape. The racial exclusivity of the term ‘gentility’ explains why Heathcliff is limited from social spaces in the novel. The qualities of ‘gentility’ described by scholars are praised by characters living in the Heights – even by Heathcliff himself. As a child, when Heathcliff discusses Edgar Linton, a boy who stands to inherit the neighboring Linton family estate, Heathcliff tells Nelly that “I wish I had light hair and a fair skin, and was dressed and behaved as well, and had a chance of being as rich as he will be” (Brontë 50)! Heathcliff strives to have the soft white hair and the delicate mannerisms of Linton, because those are the race-based gentlemanly qualities that Heathcliff thinks Catherine admires. Heathcliff’s wish to become someone he is not exemplifies how gentlemanly manners were thought to exist only with family wealth and Anglo-Saxon ancestry. Central to Heathcliff’s wish is the desire for “light hair and a fair skin”: he believes he needs to have a lighter skin tone to be recognized as possessing gentlemanly qualities. Heathcliff’s “wish” to be the same fair skin tone as Linton demonstrates how Heathcliff understands the limits to his participation in high society, and consequently the limits on obtaining Catherine’s love. Nelly reinforces the association between being a gentleman and having white skin when she responds to Heathcliff by saying,

O, Heathcliff, you are showing a poor spirit! Come to the glass, and I'll let you see what you should wish. Do you mark those two lines between your eyes; and those thick brows, that, instead of rising arched, sink in the middle; and that couple of black fiends, so deeply buried, who never open their windows boldly, but lurk glinting under them, like devil's spies? Wish and learn to smooth away the surly wrinkles, to raise your lids frankly, and change the fiends to confident, innocent angels. (Brontë 50)

Nelly confirms Heathcliff's notion that he needs to lessen his "blackness" to become a gentlemen, calling his eyes "buried" and "lurking" like "devil's spies." Nelly associates Heathcliff's eyes with devilish traits, calling them "black fiends," "fiends" being a word that can mean 'the devil' or 'an enemy' ("Fiend, n."). Nelly implies that he has to "wish" and "learn" in order to become "innocent" and "angel[ic]." Although this passage might not seem inherently racist to modern readers, the term "devil" was a highly racist term at the time and frequently used to describe Gypsies (Van Ghent). Therefore, readers of the time would have been able to pick up the racial undertones that Nelly is using to describe Heathcliff's eyes. The word "learn" is an interesting word to place in this paragraph – it is as though Nelly is mocking Heathcliff by telling him that he has the ability to learn the qualities that Linton was born into, when she well knows that is not possible. Nelly then tells Heathcliff that if he "learns" these qualities, his previously "devil" eyes can become "innocent angels." While Nelly tells Heathcliff that it is possible for his eyes to become "angel[ic]," his race and lack of origin inherently prevent him from ever achieving "angel[ic]" eyes. Contemporary readers of this passage would have noticed the deceitful words Nelly uses to misguide Heathcliff when she understands the uncontrollable fact that he is racially other; Nelly later states that she "cannot imagine a fit parentage" for the "little

dark thing” (Brontë 293). Nelly capitalizes on her position as servant and family teacher to misguide Heathcliff into thinking he can achieve qualities she knows are limited by his race.

The racial exclusivity of the term ‘gentility’ is what pushes Heathcliff to leave the Heights in an attempt to obtain wealth and status. He leaves the Earnshaw estate after overhearing Catherine say that they could never end up together (Brontë 71). Heathcliff’s race and lack of wealth exclude him from being able to marry Catherine. Catherine is in love with Heathcliff, yet feels that it would “degrade” her to marry him (Brontë 71). Heathcliff hears Catherine say this to Nelly and “had listened until he heard Catherine say it would degrade her to marry him, and then he stayed to hear no further” (Brontë 71). He immediately leaves because his fear of social exclusion has been realized with the girl he loves. Heathcliff’s immediate exit bars him from hearing the rest of Catherine’s sentiment that she loves him regardless of his race and lack of wealth. Nelly has the chance to remediate Heathcliff’s reaction because she knows that Heathcliff heard only part of the conversation, yet she actively decides not to share the full conversation with Heathcliff.

During his absence from the Heights, Heathcliff obtains the financial elements of ‘gentility’ as if it were a capitalist commodity, but is still unable to fully realize all of the privileges that the term holds. Prior to this transformation, he praises ‘gentility,’ wishing to be more proper and put together than he is. However, he still lacks the gentle manners and appearance that ‘gentility’ denotes. Eagleton claims that even with the amount of “cultural capital” obtained in Heathcliff’s “two years’ absence,” he is still only allowed to obtain “a certain amount” of this “expensive commodity of gentility” (Eagleton 104). Eagleton claims that even with wealth, ‘gentility’ is still out of reach for Heathcliff. As Leavis previously described, ‘gentility’ is a quality “unnaturally” and artificially created by upper-class citizens to protect the

importance placed on well-bred behavior and natural born wealth. This quality was originally created as an attempt to keep outsiders out of the upper class social ranks of England. As the Industrial Revolution progressed, this quality became more and more confused as Britain developed into a more commodity oriented culture, and it became easier for outsiders to obtain wealth without status. Heathcliff's mysterious absence<sup>7</sup> and upward mobility is representative of the people that were able to surprisingly obtain most of the privileges of wealth in what was previously an immobile social structure. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, it would have been difficult for an immigrant such as Heathcliff to obtain wealth. However, the rise in economic activity brought with it opportunities for 'outsiders' such as Heathcliff to become wealthy. Even though opportunities for wealth developed, society continued to exclude non-white immigrants such as Heathcliff. Heathcliff leaves the Heights to obtain the 'wealth' element of 'gentility,' yet his race holds him back from ever being able to fully realize the "angel[ic]" eyes and social capital of someone like Edgar Linton.

The Industrial Revolution was a time of significant social upheaval, and *Wuthering Heights* explores the consequences of this upheaval for both new and established members of English society, which is part of what made *Wuthering Heights* so powerful for contemporary readers. Heathcliff's social limitations reflect prevalent racial and class biases in England displayed by characters such as Nelly. Brontë's experience suggests that her own social vacillations influenced the realistic portrayal of challenges that occurred to both the Earnshaw family and Heathcliff. While marginalized people had a better chance at obtaining wealth from the plethora of new opportunities, Heathcliff's pursuit of the term of 'gentility' demonstrates how the Industrial Revolution created opportunities for wealth, but maintained social restrictions.

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<sup>7</sup> Eagleton claims that the absence of Heathcliff "has to be mysterious" because it represents how the rise in middle class wealth appeared mysterious to many members of English society (Eagleton 117).

These elements remained exclusive to the white, privileged British people that had been born with 'gentility,' particularly in Victorian England with its conservative values and focus on Royal lineage.





## Chapter Two – Contemporary and Critical Views of *Wuthering Heights*: Spotlight on Heathcliff, Nelly in the Shadows

Contemporary and modern critics and readers of *Wuthering Heights* have focused on the disturbing nature of Heathcliff and his obsessive, unrequited relationship with Catherine. Yet not all readers appreciate the implications of Nelly's role as embedded narrator on how the audience perceives Heathcliff. This chapter examines contemporary literary reviews and Charlotte Brontë's preface to the second edition to illustrate how the extraordinary focus on Heathcliff veils Nelly's narrative impact. Contemporary critics focus on the oddity of Heathcliff, thus obscuring Nelly's racist and stereotyped narrative, and Charlotte Brontë further ignores Nelly's narrative manipulation in her preface. This chapter demonstrates why Nelly is a biased, unreliable narrator, and how this unreliable narration has gone relatively unnoticed by critics and scholars.

While contemporary reviews note the strange and powerful nature of *Wuthering Heights*, the analysis of Heathcliff overwhelms other important elements found in the novel. Shortly after its release, *Wuthering Heights* was criticized for its ominous and unsettling nature. The public placed its attention on the disturbing qualities of Heathcliff and the nature of his relationship with Catherine, diverting their attention from the impact of Nelly's narrative. A review from 1850 in *The Examiner* states, "*Wuthering Heights* [is] a strange but powerful book, containing good 'rough dashes at character,' and the impress of 'real events.'" For as much praise as this review offers, the reviewer spends very little time on the novel's methods of presenting "rough dashes at character" or its ability to "impress...real events" and instead focuses extensively on disturbing aspects of Heathcliff's character and his interactions with others, especially Catherine. In 1879 *The Morning Post* compared the unfavorable attributes of Elizabeth Avery Meriwether's

book *The Master of Red Leaf* to *Wuthering Heights*, regretting that Meriwether's book lacked the "powerful but disagreeable nature" of Brontë's novel. That both the previous review and this review qualify their dismay at its "strange" and "disagreeable nature" with reference to its "power" is not a coincidence; in fact, most reviews from that time did so, too. Heathcliff's "devilish" appearance and "barbaric" behavior were not the "taste of the day," and perhaps these reviews failed to notice Nelly's biases because they shared them (*The London Post*, 1866).

Other contemporary reviews of *Wuthering Heights* pinpoint Heathcliff's "disturbing" status on his indecorous behavior, never seriously considering the role Nelly's narration has played in the view we get of him. For indeed, in recounting the story to Lockwood, Nelly could be argued to portray Heathcliff in such a way that colors our perception. I use "color" specifically, because, as discussed in Chapter One, and discussed in detail in the next chapter, in part what Nelly does is portray Heathcliff in the recognizably racist terms of the day, drawing our attention to his "dark coloring" as being tied to his "devilish" characteristics (Brontë 36). Because Brontë's readers were threatened by the rise in the immigrant population and also tended to marginalize and even racialize and dehumanize immigrants of color, Nelly's racism would not necessarily be jarring. However, Brontë offers a contrast with Lockwood's perspective of Heathcliff. Lockwood's first impression of Heathcliff is that "he is a dark-skinned gipsy in aspect, in dress and manners a gentleman...Possibly, some people might suspect him of a degree of under-bred pride; I have a sympathetic chord within that tells me it is nothing of the sort" (Brontë 4). Lockwood presents Heathcliff as "a gentleman" regardless of his "dark-skinned gipsy" appearance. Lockwood understands how people may "suspect" Heathcliff of having "under-bred pride," but writes that he has "a sympathetic chord" for him. While it is true that

Heathcliff has a complex personality, Lockwood's candid assessment of Heathcliff appears to be based on other factors than just his race.

Lockwood is intrigued and curious upon encountering such a silent, foreboding man and wants to find out more. In fact, Lockwood is so intrigued that he goes back to his rental house and asks Nelly to tell him the story of how Heathcliff grew up. Lockwood relies on Nelly to tell him Heathcliff's story, because she is the only person with knowledge about Heathcliff.

Lockwood makes his reliance apparent when he urges "'sit still, Mrs. Dean,' I cried; 'do sit still another half-hour. You've done just right to tell the story leisurely. That is the method I like; and you must finish it in the same style'" (Brontë 39). Lockwood begs Nelly to continue, crying to her and saying that she "must finish it" in the same way. Lockwood's desperate call for Nelly to continue shows two things. First, it shows that Lockwood enjoys the story and is invested in what happens to Heathcliff and the Earnshaw family. Second, it shows Nelly's narrative control because Lockwood's written tale is largely contingent on Nelly's narrative.

While Lockwood makes active moves to draw the reader's attention to the power that Nelly wields over him, the reader's attention is still focused on the actions and thoughts of Heathcliff, as that is the story that Lockwood is curious about hearing: this is one small demonstration of how Brontë does a brilliant job cloaking Nelly's narrative authority. For example, throughout Catherine's illness, Nelly is the one taking care of and nurturing her. As Catherine's servant, Nelly is privy to Catherine and Heathcliff's intimate moments, and Nelly also facilitates encounters with Catherine's husband Edgar Linton, because Catherine is too ill to facilitate these encounters herself. In other words, Nelly's role as a female servant enables her to play an active role not only as witness but also as participant in the romance of Catherine and Heathcliff; yet, Nelly attempts to come across to readers as an objective observer. Brontë gives

Nelly control to tell the story through her perspective while the reader remains largely unaware of Nelly's seemingly inconspicuous alterations that Chapter Three further examines.

One of the reasons readers may perceive Nelly as an unobtrusive narrator is because novels from the nineteenth century rarely placed servants as narrators. Carolyn Steedman capitalizes on Nelly as an opportunity to explore the historical conditions of female servants precisely because there is minimal mention of female servants in history and in fiction. Steedman observes that “unless they end up before some kind of tribunal and are forced to tell their story to a justice or a judge, and unless the record of their narrative is preserved, eighteenth-century poor women are perforce as silent as the grave, unavailable to the historian except as a name on a list” (Steedman 10). Excluding instances where poor women were “forced to tell their story,” their stories are largely absent from historical record. These women are “perforce” or powerlessly shunned to “the grave” as if they are dead and do not occupy any living space during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Poor women were inaccessible to the writers of history, who at that time were from wealthy families who could afford to record their actions on paper. The lower classes already lacked agency afforded by money and good birth, but they also lacked power to influence their historical legacy, having been omitted from the narrative of England by aristocracy who had the time and skill to preserve their life story in writing (Steedman).

Perhaps the lack of familiarity with female servants has lead readers to conclude that Nelly's narrator role is as objective and unobtrusive as her servant role, and may explain why her biased, unreliable narration received no attention in contemporary reviews. One expects a servant to be faithful to their master, yet Gideon Shunami discusses how Nelly is anything but faithful to Edgar Linton: “after each of her ‘educational’ failures with Cathy, Nelly prefers to conceal the bitter truth from Edgar, provided that he continue to place his confidence in her and let her

remain in unchallenged authority over Cathy” (Shunami 458). Nelly forfeits her honesty with Edgar to maintain her “unchallenged authority” over Cathy. Nelly demonstrates here that she is willing to sacrifice honesty for authority. While this example illustrates Nelly’s limited reliability, “most of the critics and exegetes of *Wuthering Heights* agree with the general notion that Nelly Dean is a reliable narrator. To the extent that there are defects or inconsistencies in her behavior, those are connected to her formal function and not to her lack of personal trustworthiness” (Shunami 451). Nelly’s “personal trustworthiness” is also absent in her move to mask the truth of Cathy’s behavior toward Edgar, yet critics still “agree” that Nelly is a reliable narrator.

Perhaps one reason that “most critics and exegetes” accept reliability is found in Charlotte Brontë’s 1850 preface to *Wuthering Heights*. Charlotte’s preface conceals Nelly’s unreliability by making her a conventional female figure, drawing out her “formal function” rather than “personal” qualities. Charlotte Brontë’s 1850 preface to the second edition of *Wuthering Heights* attempts to pacify many of the “strange” and “repellent” remarks about the book. Anita Levy claims that “Charlotte Brontë was tasked with writing a preface to help nullify the ‘strange’ ‘repellant’ remarks against *Wuthering Heights* and her sister Emily Brontë” (Levy 75). After the negative reviews of *Wuthering Heights* became apparent, Charlotte Brontë “tasked” herself with writing a preface to “nullify” the bad commentary that plagued her sister Emily.

In the first lines of the preface, Charlotte states that “I have just read over 'Wuthering Heights,' and, for the first time, have obtained a clear glimpse of what are termed (and, perhaps, really are) its faults; have gained a definite notion of how it appears to other people...” (Brontë 307). Charlotte explains that she has a “clear” understanding of the “faults” found by readers.

The “faults” and “appear[ance] to other people” Charlotte refers to are the “horrors” found by many contemporary reviews. Charlotte states later in the preface “that over much of 'Wuthering Heights' there broods 'a horror of great darkness'” (Brontë 308). The “great darkness” is found within the characters at the Heights, and Charlotte’s primary focus throughout the preface is to remedy that “darkness.” In her attempt to pacify the strangeness found in Heathcliff and other characters, Charlotte points to Nelly as a character devoid of horror that readers can look to as a moral character: “For a specimen of true benevolence and homely fidelity, look at the character of Nelly Dean; for an example of constancy and tenderness” (Brontë 309). Charlotte points to Nelly as a faithful and kind character, yet Nelly exhibits untrustworthy behavior on many occasions, particularly the previously discussed situation with Cathy and Edgar. Interestingly, Charlotte’s primary method to “nullify” the “strangeness” of the book is not to argue against Heathcliff being disturbing, but rather to point to the good characters in the novel as forces that balance out the “great darkness” found in Heathcliff.

To further balance the “great darkness” found in the novel, Charlotte de-historicizes the content of *Wuthering Heights* and attempts to place the novel in a feminine domain. In feminizing the novel, Charlotte further renders Nelly an unobtrusive narrator. After Charlotte’s preface “the *Athenaeum* accepts it [*Wuthering Heights*] as ‘a more than usually interesting contribution to the history of female authorship in England’” (Watson 246). This review accepts the novel as an “interesting contribution” to the history of “female authorship.” While women had written novels throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the Brontë sisters were initially anxious to escape the public’s preconceived ideas about women’s novels as frivolous, light reading material (Eliot). This is one of the reasons the Brontë sisters used male pseudonyms, which “saved them from experiencing the full force of the critical double standard,

whereby men's and women's books were judged differently, [but] it failed to shield them from controversy" (Zlotnick 34). The "association of women with 'silly' romances has a long tradition," as George Eliot writes in her essay "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" (Eliot 301). Eliot endeavors to differentiate "the nobility of purpose in the best writing from the frivolity of romantic writing by women"<sup>8</sup> (Eliot 301). The stereotypical frivolous nature of women's writing also works to make Nelly, the main female narrator, seem less obtrusive in the eyes of the reader; just as women authors were less authoritative, so were women narrators. Nancy Armstrong discusses the gendered perception of females in *Wuthering Heights* saying, "psychological differences made men political and women domestic...therefore [women] acquired identity on the basis of personal qualities"(Armstrong 465). Women largely assumed "domestic" qualities, thought to be less "political" and contrived as men. This "psychological difference" between men and women further places Nelly as a stable and reliable narrator that would not be insincere to readers.

While Charlotte hopes that the scandal caused by the first edition of *Wuthering Heights* will be muted if she points to the morality of characters like Nelly, this is not the case. Watson notes in his book "*Wuthering Heights*" and the Critics that "the second edition, famous for Charlotte's preface, did not 'provoke any reviews which showed more complete understanding'" (Watson 246). The lack of a "more complete understanding" in the content of the reviews after the addition of Charlotte's preface illustrates that even when it is made apparent that Nelly is moral and the novel is written by a woman, this does not pacify reader reactions to Heathcliff. An interesting review from *Manchester Times* in 1871 discusses Charlotte's attempt to pacify reader reactions:

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<sup>8</sup> George Eliot also struggled with the stereotype of women's writing being frivolous, and tried to remedy that problem by maintaining a male pseudonym for her whole career.

With what earnest emotion does Charlotte Brontë strive in that preface to place her sister's fame beside or above her own; with what noble yet almost tearful energy she seems to keep down her reproaches of the shallow judgment, the prudery, and want of perception.

This article takes a flattering position on Charlotte's preface, suggesting Charlotte 'strove' to place the writing of *Wuthering Heights* in a better light. Employing the word "strive" underscores the effort and "tearful energy" behind Charlotte's endeavor to alleviate "judgment" on her sister Emily and her novel. By simultaneously de-historicizing and feminizing the context of her sister's novel, Charlotte attempts to minimize the harmful social implications that a disturbing character such as Heathcliff had on Victorian readers. However, Charlotte does not succeed in displacing attention away from Heathcliff, and her preface actually places Heathcliff at the forefront of readers' minds, further obscuring Nelly's narrative authority.

The focus of critical reviews and Charlotte Brontë's preface on the harmful and disturbing nature of Heathcliff distances readers from questioning the validity of Nelly. It is important to understand the controversy that historically surrounded *Wuthering Heights*, as it plays a vital role in shaping reader perceptions of Nelly. The power found in Nelly's narration of *Wuthering Heights* is often obscured by extensive analysis of Heathcliff's character. Even today, scholars fail to acknowledge the impact of Nelly's biased narration on the powerful and realistic attributes of the novel. There seems to be a connection between Nelly's biased narration and the disturbing nature of Heathcliff, and the next chapter both explores why Nelly may have been motivated to alter the narrative, and analyzes precise instances of her bias against Heathcliff.



### **Chapter Three – Nelly as Manipulative Narrator: The Female Servant Grapples with Social Change**

The Industrial Revolution upset the nineteenth century English social order, creating an ideal opportunity for Brontë to expose the societal tensions that arose from the ascendancy of a previously marginalized lower class. Nelly leverages her superior servant education to gain Lockwood's trust and increase her social capital. Through Nelly's narration, Brontë also highlights the limitations that are placed on Heathcliff by characters such as Nelly. To understand the significance of Brontë's inclusion of two lower class characters, both Nelly the female servant, and Heathcliff the immigrant, we must first analyze how Nelly identifies her own social standing. This will allow us to understand the lens through which she judges Heathcliff and, ultimately, why Nelly is threatened by Heathcliff's presence at the Heights. Nelly establishes a binary opposition between her social standing in the Earnshaw family and that of the immigrant. The juxtaposition between her own marginalized class and Heathcliff's immigrant class illuminates the threat felt even by the lowest social class when the strict class structure of the time is destabilized.

Nelly identifies herself as a member of the Earnshaw family and superior to other servants at the Heights, and can do so because of her narrative control. During the nineteenth century, the definition of a family unit was different from what it is today. In *The Servant's Hand*, Bruce Robbins defines a nineteenth century family as a household which includes both servants and blood-relatives (Robbins 111). In keeping with this definition, Nelly considers herself a part of the Earnshaw family, telling Lockwood that,

I was almost always at Wuthering Heights; because my mother had nursed Mr. Hindley Earnshaw, that was Hareton's father, and I got used to playing with the children: I ran

errands too, and helped to make hay, and hung about the farm, ready for anything that anybody would set me to. One fine summer morning—it was the beginning of the harvest, I remember—Mr. Earnshaw, the old master, came downstairs, dressed for a journey; and after he had told Joseph what was to be done during the day, he turned to Hindley, and Cathy, and me—for I sat eating my porridge with them... (Brontë 44)

Nelly describes her history with the Earnshaw family with a great deal of pride – stressing her long history dating back to her mother nursing the late Mr. Earnshaw. As a child, Nelly grew up with the other Earnshaw children, telling Lockwood how she “got used to” playing and taking on small tasks around the household, just as the Earnshaw children did. Nelly was given the privilege to associate with these children, and therefore considered herself part of their family, not just solely a servant. Nelly reinforces her special standing by differentiating her relationship with the Earnshaws from Joseph’s relationship, which took on a more traditional master-servant relationship. Nelly explains that the master told Joseph, another Earnshaw family servant, his tasks and then “turned to Hindley, and Cathy, and me.” Nelly groups herself with the Earnshaw children instead of with Joseph, suggesting a social distance between herself and Joseph. Scholar Gideon Shunami calls Nelly’s feeling of inclusion with the Earnshaw children a feeling of “imagined equality” that arose from playing with the children and family meals (Shunami 454). The key part of this phrase is that Nelly is completely imagining this equality yet dictates her equal standing in the Earnshaw family as a fact to readers. Therefore, Nelly is falsely claiming to readers that she is a part of the family when in fact she is another servant, just like Joseph.

Perhaps one of the reasons that Nelly is motivated to distinguish herself from Joseph and “imagine equality” is because of both her long-standing relationship with the Earnshaws and her

superior educational level<sup>9</sup>. Nelly prides herself on the fact that she learned how to read and write with the Earnshaw children and boasts to Lockwood that “you could not open a book in this library that I have not looked into” (Brontë 78). Nelly believes that she is an esteemed servant with high educational achievement for her position.

Nelly is under the impression that her intellect is unique for a servant. However, Robbins and other scholars assert that nineteenth century servants had relatively high literacy rates compared to servants of the past (Robbins 111). In fact, some wealthy families began to feel so threatened by their servants that they began to limit what they would say in their presence (Robbins 109). This public fear of servant betrayal in part arose through a plan submitted by the Ministry of Police in 1818 that proposed using servants to spy on the actions of their masters: this plan went so far as to be seen by Parliament (Robbins 109). As demonstrated by this plan, it was well known throughout Britain that servants were able to obtain private information that was valued at a high price by the government. Therefore, employers’ fears that their servants would betray them were not completely unrealistic. Servants knew the ins and outs of their employers’ lives and would have been involved in everything from dressing to cooking food. If servants were enticed by the government to share information, it could be disastrous for the masters. Henry Fielding, the well-known novelist and playwright, observed in *The Covent-Garden Journal* that masters either lived in fear of, or were dependent on the servants in their home (Robbins 109). Fielding’s observation as well as the plan submitted by the Ministry of Police suggests an uncomfortable shift in the master and servant relationship. Masters feared losing control of their own servants, and also feared losing their servants services, especially as the demand for skilled factory labor was on the rise and represented an increasingly attractive alternative to domestic service. The widespread fear of losing control of servants is validated by

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph speaks with a strong Yorkshire accent, and is evidently uneducated (Mathison 108).

Nelly many times throughout *Wuthering Heights* when she disobeys direct orders from Linton and Earnshaw. The previous chapter analyzed an instance where Nelly directly disobeyed the orders of Edgar Linton. Because Nelly was only warned by Linton instead of seriously punished for being deceitful, she feels a certain kind of authority over Linton.

Nelly possesses authority over Linton within the narrative and also possesses authority over the telling of the story. Nelly narrates the novel as a story to Lockwood, appearing to normally follow chronological order and present a plethora of characters' thoughts, actions, and words. The storytelling method that Nelly uses deceives the reader into thinking that the narration is done from a third person omniscient narrator, because the flow of the story and the character descriptions seem to come from many more perspectives than just Nelly. The reason for this is that when Nelly does not witness events, she uses accounts from other servants, gossip of the town, and quotes from letters to formulate missing pieces of the story that she did not witness (Shunami 453, 457). In my own first experience reading *Wuthering Heights* I would often forget that Nelly was the person narrating the majority of the story. My inadvertent disregard for Nelly is not unique<sup>10</sup>; many of Nelly's narrative adjustments are small opinions and slight changes of wording that integrate her own biases on character actions. Robbins affirms the power of the narrator, noting that "authority has been attributed to those characters within a story who serve the double function of transmitting it" (Robbins 91). Robbins not only argues that there is power in telling the story, but also asserts that the argument over "reliability" of a narrator is further proof of the importance surrounding narration. Robbin's argument supports Nelly's unique social authority originating from her ability to decide how to narrate the story.

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<sup>10</sup> Beth Newman notes in her article "The Situation of the Looker-On" that, "As a character in her own narration, Nelly keeps one eye always at the keyhole; her main task, quite literally, is to supervise. As a *narrator* she never completely abandons this task, carefully overseeing Lockwood's looking on. She does her police work so effectively that hardly anyone ever suspects it" (Newman 1035).

Nelly can choose how to portray social order at the Heights, and the sheer “narrative privilege” (Robbins 99) given to Nelly affords her the ability to manipulate class structures and cast Heathcliff in a negative light.

Nelly attempts to resist Heathcliff’s entry by using her intelligence and narrative authority. Mr. Earnshaw adopts Heathcliff after finding him starving and homeless in Liverpool. Liverpool was a port city known for attracting large numbers of immigrants, and his “racial otherness cannot be a matter of dispute” (Churchill, Von Sneidern 172). Heathcliff’s racial ‘otherness’ limits Earnshaw’s acceptance, as Earnshaw says: “[Y]ou must e’en take it as a gift of god; thought it’s as dark almost as if it came from the devil” (Brontë 31). While Earnshaw believes that they must “take it as a gift,” Heathcliff is regarded as an “it,” devoid of human qualities like any other inanimate object. Without even uttering a word, Heathcliff is labeled as someone “from the devil” and even inhuman because of his “dark” coloring.

Earnshaw is not the only character to make racial judgments about Heathcliff. Nelly also has biases against Heathcliff, but she imposes her own biases onto other characters’ voices; Shunami notes that “Nelly Dean is not exempt from the limited, subjective view of events which happen before her eyes” (Shunami 454). When Catherine learns that her father could not bring her a gift because he instead brought home Heathcliff, Nelly says that Catherine “spit at the stupid little thing” (Brontë 32). Catherine might have “spit” at Heathcliff, but it is Nelly’s choice as narrator to add that Heathcliff is “a stupid little thing.” Nelly thus has used her narrative control to insert her opinion of Heathcliff as if it were Catherine’s opinion. Scholars have also noted these alterations, Gideon Shunami says that Nelly “fashions the narrative from scratch by recounting authentic developments as well as by adding her own touches of exaggeration in regard to the heroes’ actions and by supposedly obliterating her own harmful deeds” (Shunami

457). The spit is authentic, but Nelly adds “her own touches of exaggeration” to amplify Catherine’s negative opinion of Heathcliff, perhaps to balance her own feelings of threat. Nelly downplays her own manipulative deeds against Heathcliff by attributing negative thoughts to other characters.

To mask her manipulation, Nelly frames her negative acts as if they are consistent with other members of the Earnshaw family. Soon after describing about how “stupid” Heathcliff is, Nelly says she “put it on the landing of the stairs, hoping it might be gone on the morrow” (Brontë 32). Nelly refuses to treat Heathcliff as a family member despite Mr. Earnshaw’s order to “let it sleep with the children” (Brontë 32). Nelly frames her hatred for Heathcliff as if it is supported by other members of the family, saying “but Hindley hated him, and, to say the truth, I did the same” (Brontë 32). Nelly disobeys orders from her master to bring Heathcliff into a room and instead leaves “it” on the stairs like an animal. Nelly is subsequently punished by Mr. Earnshaw, but attempts to justify her cruel act by saying that “Hindley hated him” as if that makes her insubordination acceptable. John Stevenson notes another example of Nelly framing her negative opinion of Heathcliff as if it is the opinion of the entire family, “Years later Nelly will tell Lockwood... ‘We don’t in general take to foreigners here’” (Stevenson 68). Nelly confidently asserts her opinion that the Earnshaw family does not “take to foreigners,” therefore imposing her biased and racist perspective of Heathcliff to Lockwood as though all other members of the family think so too.

Nelly also suggests that Heathcliff is responsible for Earnshaw’s increased violence, when Hindley’s nasty behavior is what incites such violence. Prior to Heathcliff’s arrival, Nelly describes Mr. Earnshaw as being “rather severe sometimes” (Brontë 31). However, Earnshaw’s severity quickly morphs into outright violence against Hindley for the physical torment that

Hindley puts Heathcliff through. After one particularly violent dispute between Hindley and Heathcliff, Nelly remarks that “he [Heathcliff] complained so seldom, indeed, of such stirs as these, that I really thought him not vindictive—I was deceived, completely, as you will hear” (Brontë 34). Nelly saying that she was “deceived” and that Heathcliff is “vindictive” suggests that Heathcliff deserves Hindley’s hatred. Hindley “hate[s]” Heathcliff because he views Heathcliff’s entry into the Earnshaw family as a direct threat to his position of power, perhaps because Mr. Earnshaw appears to favor and protect Heathcliff over Hindley. As the oldest male child, Hindley is positioned to inherit both the Heights and the family fortune, as long as Heathcliff’s presence doesn’t somehow change his social standing.

Similar to how Hindley is threatened by Heathcliff, Nelly believes that Heathcliff threatens her position in the family as he begins to form a close friendship with Catherine. Nelly addresses her fear by re-asserting her commitment to the Earnshaw family following Mr. Earnshaw’s death. When Earnshaw dies, Catherine screams “oh, he’s dead, Heathcliff! He’s dead!” and Nelly comments that “they both set up a heart-breaking cry. I joined my wail to theirs, loud and bitter” (Brontë 37-38). Despite this effort, Nelly’s role as a supportive servant and confidant is disrupted, if not displaced, by Catherine’s developing friendship with Heathcliff. After the “loud and bitter” cry, Nelly then follows Heathcliff and Catherine up to their room. While watching them comfort each other she eerily observes “while I sobbed and listened, I could not help wishing we were all there safe [in Heaven] together” (Brontë 38). Nelly so desperately wants to re-establish the primacy of her friendship with Catherine and her place in the Earnshaw family that she wishes she could live in eternity with Catherine and Heathcliff—a woman she is employed for and a man she hates. Heathcliff and Catherine’s friendship

physically excludes Nelly because without Heathcliff, Catherine would rely on Nelly for comfort.

Even though Nelly mentions Heathcliff and Catherine wail upon discovering that Earnshaw is dead, Nelly asserts to Lockwood that Heathcliff is ungrateful about his adoption. Nelly tells Lockwood, “He was not insolent to his benefactor, simply insensible” (Brontë 33). She describes Heathcliff as ‘indifferent’ about the care Earnshaw gave him, yet his despairing cry when Earnshaw dies seems to show otherwise. Terry Eagleton notes in *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës* that Heathcliff’s grief at Earnshaw’s death directly contradicts the claim Nelly makes in her narrative (Eagleton 111). Heathcliff’s “heart-breaking cry” is one of many actions that illustrate his grief for the loss of Mr. Earnshaw. Nelly dehumanizes Heathcliff by downplaying his emotions towards the death of a man who saved him from life on the streets of Liverpool.

While Nelly and Hindley seem acutely aware of the threat Heathcliff represents to their social position, Heathcliff is blissfully unaware of the impact his immigrant status has on his social standing and family position. It is therefore crucial when Heathcliff finally realizes that he is regarded as a servant, not a family member, and begins to hate the Earnshaw family for imposing unnatural boundaries on his actions. Heathcliff stumbles upon this troubling realization when Catherine is taken into the Linton household, and the Linton’s grandmother reveals her viewpoint on Heathcliff:

I declare he is that strange acquisition my late neighbor made in his journey to Liverpool—a little Lascar, or an American or Spanish castaway, ‘A wicked boy, at all events’ ...’ and quite unfit for a decent house!’ (Brontë 44)



This racial viewpoint becomes crystal clear to Heathcliff when he is treated differently from Catherine upon her return to the Heights. Upon welcoming Catherine back into the household, Hindley forces Heathcliff to “come and wish Miss Catherine welcome, like the other servants” (Brontë 47). Before his interaction with the Linton family, Heathcliff was unaware of his social standing. This lack of awareness was due in part to his friendship with Catherine—and their friendship becomes compromised as Heathcliff realizes that he is not only treated differently by the Earnshaw family, but also seen by Catherine as a “dirty boy” (Brontë 47). Heathcliff discovers the limitations his social standing has on his romantic relationship with Catherine, and soon after, he leaves the Heights.

Following Heathcliff’s return, Nelly notes that “though his exterior was altered, his mind was unchangeable and unchanged” (Brontë 89). Even with an “altered” “exterior,” Nelly maintains her biased opinions on Heathcliff. She makes this character judgment shortly following Heathcliff’s visit to Catherine. Nelly has little frame of reference to make such a bold statement considering she has not spent any one-on-one time with Heathcliff since his return. Nelly’s quick character judgment demonstrates that her racist and classist opinions prevent her from ever accepting Heathcliff as an equal member of society, even with his wealth.

As Nelly finishes her story, she admits her own misuse of access and power to Lockwood. She tells Lockwood:

I seated myself in a chair, and rocked to and fro, passing harsh judgment on my many derelictions of duty; from which, it struck me then, all the misfortunes of my employers sprang. It was not the case, in reality, I am aware; but it was, in my imagination, that dismal night; and I thought Heathcliff himself less guilty than I. (Brontë 244)

Nelly realizes and reflects upon her failures as a servant, even specifically stating that “all the misfortunes” came from her own misdoing. Nelly acknowledges yet attempts to subvert her manipulation when she says that her failures were “not the case” but rather “in my imagination.” Nelly attempts to downplay the “reality” of her manipulation as a preface to her admission of guilt. However, by saying “I thought Heathcliff himself less guilty than I” she admits the partial accountability that she feels for the part she has played in influencing the “misfortunes” of the Earnshaw family. Perhaps the guilt that Nelly feels for her own failure to act as an honest and loyal servant is one of the reasons that she assigns racial bias to her narration of Heathcliff. Nelly feels responsible for many of the misgivings of the Earnshaw family, yet identifies the beginning of the misgivings with Heathcliff’s entry. Nelly assigns animosity towards Heathcliff, and the consequential guilt she feels from meddling in the Earnshaw affairs illuminates her bias and unreliability. Nelly might not have felt the need to influence Lockwood’s perception of Heathcliff if she did not think that she could be the one culpable for the misfortunes of the Earnshaw family without her small narrative changes. The cloud of guilt that hangs over Nelly reaffirms my claim that she has knowingly and intentionally manipulated the narrative against Heathcliff for personal benefit.

### Conclusion

*“Nelly, I am Heathcliff! He’s always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being.”*

*-Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights**

In the epigraph above, Catherine proclaims her intense love for Heathcliff to Nelly, saying, “Nelly, I am Heathcliff!” Catherine experiences her love for Heathcliff as a total melding of her identity with his: “He’s always, always in my mind...as my own being” (Brontë 73). Catherine’s declaration has far reaching social and personal implications. At the time *Wuthering Heights* was published, women had little legal power in marriage, and once married, “lost her independent legal personality...Her legal existence was subsumed in that of her husband” (“Marriage Law”). Catherine experiences her love for Heathcliff as a total melding of mind and spirit, but this oneness is out of choice rather than one dictated by law. While Catherine experiences a spiritual oneness with Heathcliff, she is legally conjoined with her husband Edgar Linton. Catherine continuously declares her love for Heathcliff, and him for her, while she is married to Edgar. While *Wuthering Heights* does not emphasize the vast amount of legal and social control Edgar has over Catherine, her love for Heathcliff is dangerous and could be punished in the court of law (“Marriage Law”).

Even though Catherine loves Heathcliff, there is nothing she can do to be legally bound with him. Up until the 1857 Divorce Act, the only place to obtain a legal divorce was the Church of England, and the 1857 Divorce Act only gave men the power to divorce with suspicion of adultery (“Marriage Law”). Women had minimal legal power when married as their husband assumed the power; therefore, while Catherine may feel a more powerful spiritual connection with Heathcliff, the law held that she and Edgar were one.

Even if Catherine had possessed legal power to divorce Edgar and marry Heathcliff, she may not have done so. After all, Catherine marries Edgar knowing that “[Edgar] Linton’s [soul] is as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire” (Brontë 71). Catherine marries Edgar because of the wealth and class he provides. Nelly sees through the flawed logic of Catherine’s decision and questions her, asking, “have you considered how you’ll bear the separation, and how he’ll [Heathcliff] bear to be quite deserted in the world” (Brontë 72)? This scene occurs before Heathcliff has left and acquired his wealth; therefore Catherine marrying Heathcliff is impractical as he is uneducated, poor, and has little to no social capital. Catherine realizes this, saying that if she and Heathcliff married they would “be beggars” (Brontë 72). Catherine is conflicted because she loves Heathcliff, but he has no social capital. Therefore, Catherine justifies marrying Edgar by saying, “If I marry [Edgar] Linton I can aid Heathcliff to rise...” (Brontë 72). Nelly hears this and reacts by saying, “you are ignorant of the duties you undertake in marrying; or else ... you are a wicked, unprincipled girl” (Brontë 73). As previously discussed, the marriage laws were strict, and Nelly warns Catherine against marrying Linton because Nelly knows that there is no way for Catherine to undo a marriage. While Nelly is being practical about the “duties” Catherine “undertake[s]” in marriage, perhaps it also does not please her to know that Catherine would be unfaithful to a ‘gentile’ man like Edgar, particularly with Heathcliff.

As a non-white immigrant outsider, Heathcliff has continuously been pushed out of social spaces in the novel, not only by Nelly, but by much of society, as he is unable to obtain many elements of the “gentility” that people inside of British society were born into. After Heathcliff returns with wealth, he uses his gained social capital to pressure Nelly into allowing him to see Catherine – and Heathcliff and Catherine are finally able to admit their love to each other. While

love across social borders is hardly a new literary phenomenon, Heathcliff moves Catherine's grave so they can be together through death, an act that would have gone against both religious and civil law. Regardless of his racial and social status, by the end of the novel Heathcliff is able to be eternally together with Catherine.

An unmistakable social transformation takes place at the Heights: Catherine and Heathcliff are eternally together and by the end of the novel a female acts as the head of the household (Cathy Linton). When Edgar dies, Cathy gets control of his house, and when Heathcliff dies, the Heights goes to Hareton Earnshaw. The Heights goes back into the hands of the original Earnshaw family. However, unlike his predecessors, Hareton is an uneducated 'brute' because Heathcliff withheld education and forced Hareton to work as a servant. After Heathcliff's death, Hareton receives education from Cathy Linton, and with this education Hareton begins to transform from a 'mindless' boy to one that wishes to read and learn how to write (Brontë 280). Education affords Hareton the cultural capital that Heathcliff denied him, and Hareton's developing education is what incites Cathy's affection.

Whereas Hareton's education gives him cultural capital that almost instantly transforms him into a suitable gentleman for Cathy, Heathcliff is never fully able to access this gentlemanly status. Prior to the publication of *Wuthering Heights*, the first government department for education was established in 1839, and many other boys like Hareton were given the opportunity to gain cultural capital through education (Gillard). England began providing education for the masses, ranging from Sunday school, which taught the poor to read the Bible, to Schools of industry, which gave the poor manual training and elementary instruction (Gillard).

The Heights' transition towards allowing different social classes to eternally be together (Heathcliff and Catherine), a woman running an estate (Cathy Linton), and a boy accessing

cultural capital through education (Hareton Earnshaw) all chart the many social changes that England was nearing. The Heights' transitions from an aristocratic system, where power is only held by the wealthy, to a meritocracy, ruled by the education and skills of Cathy.

I am not suggesting that *Wuthering Heights* is the force that caused the many significant social changes that happen in England soon after it was published. Rather, the microcosm of the Heights has far-reaching social and class implications that seem to chart similar changes that happen in England at the time. This book looks forward to social changes that had not yet happened but were building. In her book *Uneven Developments*, Mary Poovey discusses how the development of social changes occurred unevenly:

Middle-class ideology we most often associate with the Victorian period was both contested and always under construction; because it was always in the making...This ideological formulation was uneven both in the sense of being experienced differently by individuals who were positioned differently within the social formation (by sex, class, or race, for example) and in the sense of being articulated differently by the different institutions, discourse, and practices that it both constituted and was constituted by.

(Poovey 3)

The Heights similarly displays uneven development, particularly through the lens of Nelly. Through a powerful female servant, readers obtain a unique perspective on how Nelly “experienced differently” the changes in “ideological formation” that came about through the Industrial Revolution. Nelly both articulates and influences the dramatic social changes that occur at the Heights, and the socially progressive nature of *Wuthering Heights* might not be visible without the lens of this powerful female servant narrator grappling with the many changes the Industrial Revolution provoked.

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