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CRITICAL HISTORY

RECEPTION AND EARLY REVIEWS

Early reviews of the novel praised it for its imaginative potency while criticising it for being strange and ambiguous. In a biographical notice attached to many modern versions of the novel, Charlotte Brontë complains that the novel did not receive sufficient merit in its initial reception. But *Wuthering Heights* did not go unrecognised by its early readers. Literary critics repeatedly acknowledged its originality, genius and imaginative power – if they also complained about its moral ambiguity.

Following Charlotte Brontë's clarification of the gender of Ellis Bell, Victorian readers began to place *Wuthering Heights* in the gothic category, a category of literature peculiarly associated with women. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, in 1854, describes *Wuthering Heights* as 'a fiend of a book, an incredible monster, combining all the stronger female tendencies from Mrs Browning to Mrs Brownrigg. The action is laid in Hell, – only it seems places and people have no English names there.'

For the Victorians, *Wuthering Heights* was inarguably an immoral and uncivilised book. It deeply challenged all their ideas about propriety and literature. Equally by the 1920s, it was just as clear that its great value and message was metaphysical. Lord David Cecil, Professor of English Literature at Oxford, who helped to integrate *Wuthering Heights* into the canon of English Literature in his famous chapter in *Early Victorian Novelists* (1934). He argues that Brontë's motivation in *Wuthering Heights* was an exploration of the meaning of life: 'Her great characters exist in virtue of the reality of their attitude to the universe; they look before us on the simple epic outline which is all that we see of man when revealed against the huge landscape of the cosmic scene' (p. 151).



CHECK THE BOOK

Patsy Stoneman (1993) offers an accessible and representative selection of early reviews of *Wuthering Heights*.

CRITICAL HISTORY

Wuthering Heights is a novel which has generated enormous critical attention. It is impossible here to give an account of everything that has been written and said about this novel. Doubtless, there are some important omissions but the review attempts to give a representative overview of some of the positions that it is possible to take up in relation to the text Charlotte Brontë's **romantic** explanation of Emily Brontë as an inspired genius has led many critics to search for the unconscious or hidden meaning of *Wuthering Heights*; it has influenced **psychoanalytic criticism** and certain kinds of **formalist** and **feminist** criticism.

Following Charlotte's lead, some nineteenth-century analyses of *Wuthering Heights* emphasised the psychological elements of the novel's plot and characters. The critic Sydney Dobell praised Emily Brontë for her portrayal of the 'deep unconscious' truth of Catherine Earnshaw's personality (in E. Jolly, ed., 1878, pp. 169–74). However, Dobell insisted that *Wuthering Heights* was an early work by Charlotte Brontë. According to Dobell, Brontë understood that 'certain crimes and sorrows are not so much the result of intrinsic evil as of a false position in the scheme of things'. Dobell's is a view that anticipates some **feminist** discussions of Catherine's choice.

Much early criticism tended to look to Brontë's life to understand elements in her work. For example, critics attempted to draw parallels between Brontë's depiction of Heathcliff and her brother Branwell. Such criticism is based on a view that the relationship between literature and the world is relatively straightforward, that reality exists and that it is literature's job to describe it. The role of literary criticism, according to this view, is to assess the accuracy of the representations, and also to assess the moral content of the work, for literature and the arts in general were held to be an integral part of the civilised life, and thus should contribute to the moral fabric of society.



QUESTION

Given the Victorian concept of literature as a morally edifying contributor to the civilised life, consider whether *Wuthering Heights* can be judged a work of inspired genius.

History

1825 First passenger railway opens

1834 Parish workhouses introduced. Abolition of slavery in territories governed by Britain

1837 The Victorian era begins. Victoria becomes Queen

1838–42 Chartism is at its peak of popularity

1842 Employment in mines of women and children under ten is outlawed. Chartist uprising

Author's life

1818 Born in Yorkshire the fifth of six children

1821 Her mother dies and she is sent to Cowan Bridge School as a boarder

1825 Emily's two elder sisters die of consumption at Cowan Bridge School and Emily and her sister Charlotte return to Haworth where they are brought up by their aunt

1835 Attends Roe Head School to study to become a teacher but is physically home-sick and returns to Haworth

1837 Spends six months as a governess at a girls' boarding school at Law Hill near Halifax, before returning home through ill health

1842 Goes to Brussels with Charlotte but aunt dies and they return home

1846 Emily and her sisters publish a book of poems under the pseudonyms Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell

1847 *Wuthering Heights*

1848 Brother Bramwell dies; Emily dies from tuberculosis

Literature

1811 Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*

1817 Lord Byron, *Manfred*. Sir Walter Scott, *Rob Roy*

1818 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*. Lord Byron, *Childe Harold* (Canto IV)

1819–24 Lord Byron, *Don Juan*

1830 William Cobbett, *Rural Rides*

1838 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Seraphim and Other Poems*

1848 Robert Browning, *Dramatic Lyrics*

1857 Elizabeth Gaskell *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*

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Hilda Marsden and Ian Jack, eds, *Wuthering Heights*, Clarendon Press, 1976

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