**The context of *Wuthering Heights***

**When was Wuthering Heights set?**

The dates of events in the novel are very precisely established, from Heathcliff’s arrival in 1771 through to Lockwood’s appearance in 1801 and his final visit in 1802. We are constantly told how much time has passed and what time of year we are in. It may be that Emily Brontë set her story well before she herself was born in order to create a society which was wild and primitive and, by distancing events through time, to heighten the romantic atmosphere.

However, even when they are set in the remote past, works of fiction are shaped by the time at which they are written, published and received. The context given here, therefore, relates largely to Emily Brontë’s own lifetime.

**Nineteenth century Britain: a country transformed**

During Emily Brontë’s lifetime, Britain underwent changes that transformed the lives of its people:

* **British manufacturing** became dominant in the world and **trade and the financial sector** also grew significantly; living in a village whose livelihood depended on wool, and which was close to the major manufacturing centres of Bradford and Halifax, the Brontës would have been very conscious of these developments
* **The rail network**, begun in the 1830s and largely completed by the 1870s, had a great effect not only on the accessibility of travel and speed of movement, but also on the appearance of the countryside.*Wuthering Heights* is set before such widening of communication; for example, Mr Earnshaw walks to Liverpool and back over three days
* **British power and influence overseas** expanded and seemed to be permanent; Mr Earnshaw visits Liverpool which would have been a major trading port
* **The population grew enormously**, from around 12 million at the time Emily Brontë was born to nearly 20 million by the time she died
* This period also saw a significant **shift of population from the countryside to the towns** and the consequent growth of large cities.

**An age of optimism**

This was a turbulent period which in many ways saw itself as a time of**confident progress**. Many people believed that Britain was leading the world into **a new and better age**, illustrated by:

* More **enlightened laws**
* The **benefits of wealth** created through industrial development (though its distribution was uneven)
* Greater **political stability** than in the rest of Europe, though it is worth noting that Rev. Brontë had experienced industrial unrest in his early years in Yorkshire and this is the subject of Charlotte’s novel *Shirley*(1849)
* The spreading of what was seen to be the **‘civilising influence’ of Christianity** around the world. This was a result of the [missionary](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/missionary)impulse which developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For example the United Society for the Propagation of the [Gospel](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Gospel) first sent missionaries to India in 1820 and to South Africa in 1821. Joseph certainly reflects this zeal, if not the desired concern for others
* Other important values included
  + **Deference** to class and authority
  + The conviction that **work is a duty** which is good for the soul.

**Brontë and social issues**

Social concerns and social reform are not central topics in Emily Brontë’s fiction. She wrote quite personally, with a relatively limited cast of characters and with none of the social breadth of, say, Charles Dickens. She did not attempt the kind of biting criticism or satire found in Dickens’ work.

This is not to say that *Wuthering Heights* is completely free of social concerns, but she tended to approach issues in terms of their impact on the personal lives of individuals rather than as matters of institutional reform or legislative action. In *Wuthering Heights*:

* The most obvious example of a social issue is the refusal of most characters to accept Heathcliff as an equal; even Nelly seems to struggle with this
* There is a clear contrast between life at Wuthering Heights (even in Mr Earnshaw’s time) and life at Thrushcross Grange
* It was expected that servants like Nelly would stay with a family through successive generations
* There is a contrast between the Yorkshire rural ways and the ways of the ‘city’; Lockwood has to get used to different mealtimes, for example
* The rights of women were severely restricted by society and by laws.

**Religious attitudes to social position**

Far from advocating the equality of individuals which was a feature of the [Early Church](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Early-Church), the Established Church of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries upheld the status quo. It was believed that the relative social positions of the rich and the poor came about as a result of ‘God’s appointment’; there was nothing that people could or should try to do to change the situation. Nelly, perhaps the unquestioning voice of tradition in the novel, wants to leave[judgement](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/judgement) to God and believes that people should be left as they are.

Emily Brontë herself seems to believe in equality through common humanity, and in the ability of people to change. However, this view does not seem to arise from religious conviction, or at least not through orthodox Christian understanding of the time. We are told that she would sit with her back to the pulpit whilst her father was preaching! She did not find her father’s austere version of religion attractive and she satirised this through the ‘self-righteous[Pharisee](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Pharisee)’ Joseph.

**The right use of wealth**

Wealth is not seen as a sign of quality of character in *Wuthering Heights*. The Lintons appear to be spoiled and snobbish as is clearly shown from our first meeting with them in Chapter 6. Catherine’s decision to marry Edgar because of the money and style which such a marriage offers does not seem to improve her character, despite her avowed intention to use her wealth to ‘aid Heathcliff to rise’.

Brontë is not concerned with how Heathcliff makes himself a wealthy gentleman, but more with how he uses the power that it brings in order to pursue his revenge.

## Education in Victorian England

Education was not universal during Emily Brontë’s lifetime. Many people, particularly in the new industrial slums, received little or no formal education and were unable to read or write:

* **Long established schools** such as Eton and Winchester had existed for hundreds of years, but were only accessible to the wealthy and powerful, and this period saw the establishment of many more of these**public schools**
* There were also old **grammar schools**, usually in towns and cities, which offered education to some poorer students, but places were limited and they were accessible only to boys
* There were **elementary schools** (i.e., junior and infant schools), often set up by either the [Church of England](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Church-of-England) or [Nonconformist](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Nonconformist) [churches](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/churches)
* There were also various kinds of **charity school**, established for particular kinds of pupils, such as the daughters of poor or deceased[clergymen](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/clergymen)
* Other schools were established as **small-scale private charities**
* **Trades unions** and other organizations also set up various kinds of educational establishments, aimed at improving the education of **adult members** of the **working classes**
* Some educational provisions were included in the **Factory Acts** of the 1830s and 1840s.

It was not until 1870, twenty-two years after Emily Brontë’s death, that the**Education Act** was passed and made a significant start on the provision by the government of universal elementary education, a process which was completed by the Act of 1902.

**The significance of belief**

As the daughter of a [clergyman](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/clergyman), Emily Brontë inevitably grew up in a deeply[religious](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/religious) atmosphere. Rev. Brontë was extremely [devout](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/devout), as was his wife, Maria Branwell, who also brought to the household the influence of her [Methodist](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Methodist)upbringing. The latter was intensified when Elizabeth Branwell went to live at Haworth after her sister’s death in 1821.

**Social contact**

Many of the men Emily and her sisters met would have been clergymen like their father, either his [curates](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/curates) or [ministers](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/ministers) visiting from neighbouring [parishes](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/parishes). This no doubt accounts for the fact that clergymen or those who hold strong religious views appear in almost every one of the Brontë novels, though often not in very complimentary terms.

**Church and Chapel**

Dissatisfaction with the church

During the eighteenth century, there had been great dissatisfaction with the[Anglican](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Anglican) [Church](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Church) and new religious movements grew up, including [Methodism](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Methodism), whilst the [Baptist](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Baptist) Church which had started in 1612 also flourished. The[Congregationalist](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Congregationalist) churches had developed from the Independent churches that[seceded](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/seceded) from the Church of England at the time of the [English Civil War](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/English-Civil-War). Collectively, these became known as [Dissenting](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Dissenting) or [Nonconformist](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Nonconformist) churches.

When he was a young man, Rev. Patrick Brontë had friends who were Methodists and had been affected by their beliefs. In fact, Haworth was an appropriate [parish](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/parish) for Rev. Brontë because it had a long connection with[Methodism](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Methodism). [John Wesley](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/John-Wesley) himself had preached there in 1748, speaking to 4000 people in the churchyard; and William Grimshaw, whose ministry was from 1742-63, made a practice of travelling round the parish, holding services in cottages, on the model of Wesley and the early Methodists.

Religious practice and class

These secessions and new [sects](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sects) had arisen because people wanted a simpler, more direct religion and forms of worship without [priests](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/priests) or [ritual](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/ritual). These new congregations, particularly the Methodists and the Baptists, were predominantly lower class and a social distinction was indicated by describing people as either ‘church’ (i.e. Anglican) or ‘chapel’ (i.e. Nonconformist).

**Evangelicalism**

Since 1783 a powerful movement known as [Evangelicalism](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Evangelicalism) had been formed within the Church of England, in part influenced by some Nonconformist sects.[Evangelicals](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Evangelicals) believed that human beings are profoundly affected by [sin](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sin) and therefore unable to achieve a close relationship with [God](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/God) by their own efforts, however hard they might try. [William Wilberforce](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/William-Wilberforce) (1759-1833, the great social reformer who was one of the leaders of the campaign to end slavery in Britain) and [Lord Shaftesbury](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Lord-Shaftesbury) (1801-85, who worked to end poverty and the exploitation of children) were both Evangelicals.

**Religion in *Wuthering Heights***

Religion plays a part in Wuthering Heights in a number of ways, though formal religion seems to remain in the background. The versions of religious belief that the novel presents are surprising considering Emily Brontë’s upbringing. Certainly, many Victorian readers found them unacceptable and shocking. In literary terms, the picture of religion given in the novel fits with the largely godless pattern of tragedy or the inverted values of the [Gothic](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Gothic). (See [Literary context](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/Wuthering-Heights/35/2466))

**A variety of religious beliefs**

Characters in *Wuthering Heights* represent a range of religious beliefs and attitudes:

* **Joseph** espouses maxims from the [Bible](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Bible) but is portrayed as a hypocrite and is compared to the [Pharisees](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Pharisees). There is no love or [mercy](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/mercy) in his attitude, only [judgement](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/judgement). As the most obviously religious character in the novel, he establishes an atmosphere of harsh [Christianity](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Christianity), based on punishment and strict, restrictive rules. (See [Characterisation: Joseph](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/Wuthering-Heights/35/2512?jump=h2-2), for more.) Emily Brontë, more than her sisters, seems to have largely rejected her father’s [Christian](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Christian) faith, perhaps because she spent more time at home than they did.
* **Nelly’s** generally caring attitude seems to stem from a basic Christian belief. She is happy to leave [judgement](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/judgement) and justice to God.
* **Lockwood** shows no strong religious belief, but his dream of the sermon in Chapter 3 establishes the idea of [forgiveness](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/forgiveness) of [sin](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sin) which is relevant throughout the novel. We might observe that there is plenty of sin and not much forgiveness.
* **Catherine** and **Heathcliff** establish their own religious ideologies, including their own versions of ‘heaven’ based on their love of nature. At the end of the novel, Heathcliff has clearly rejected Christian beliefs and the author seems to suggest that Heathcliff and Catherine may be able to inhabit their own heaven together after death. Both characters are linked with supernatural powers other than the Christian [God](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/God). In Chapter 17, Isabella recounts how Heathcliff prays for revenge to a god of ‘senseless dust and ashes’.
* **Most other characters** seem to have little religious sensibility. Although, in Catherine’s childhood, attendance at church and visits from the curate are regular occurrences, these are not sustained once the older Earnshaws die, nor have they had a clear impact on the behaviour of the protagonists. Arguably, characters as diverse as Edgar and Hindley would benefit from pursuing Christian virtues. Even **Isabella**sees revenge as the only way to relieve her suffering.

<http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/Wuthering-Heights/35/2541>