**Critical interpretations of Wuthering Heights**

**FEMINIST**  
  
SUMMARY Feminist literary theory focuses on the presentation of women in male and female-authored literary texts. Their interest centres on the variety of ways in which females (both writers and characters) rebel against traditionally patriarchal values handed down to them through generations of male writers and characters.  
  
**Elaine Showalter in *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830 – 1980***

(Showalter writes more specifically about Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* and Bertha Mason, Rochester’s mad wife in the novel. However, you can link her theories to the presentation of female ‘madness’ in the characters of Catherine Earnshaw and Isabella Linton in *Wuthering Heights*):  
  
‘Bronte offers several explanations for Bertha’s madness, all taken from the discourse of Victorian psychiatry. As Rochester tells the story […] after their marriage, Bertha becomes ‘intemperate and unchaste’, a monster of sexual appetite who finally is pronounced mad by ‘medical men’. Bronte’s account echoes the beliefs of Victorian psychiatry about the transmission of madness: […] the reproductive system was the sources of mental illness in women […] and is linked to the periodicity of the menstrual cycle […] Bertha suffers from the ‘moral insanity’ associated with women’s sexual desires.’  
  
**Ellen Moers (1976)**

‘the puzzles of *^ Wuthering Heights* may be best resolved if the novel is read as a statement of a very serious kind about a girl’s childhood and the adult woman’s tragic yearning to return to it. Catherine’s impossible love for Heathcliff becomes comprehensible as a pre-adolescent (but not pre-sexual) love modelled after the sister-brother relationship. The gratuitous cruelties of the novel are thus justified as realistic attributes of the nursery world – and as frankly joyous memories of childhood eroticism.’  
  
**Gilbert and Gubar (1979) *^ The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination***  
Gilbert and Gubar’s interest in the ambivalent presentation of gender focuses upon their reading of Heathcliff as ‘female’. This is in the sense that second sons, bastards and daughters are feminine. Heathcliff is ‘female’ because he is dispossessed of social power. He has no status, no social place and no property. He is only Heathcliff, not Mr Heathcliff, or the Master, in contrast to Edgar Linton. Heathcliff’s rebellions against the social conventions of class, marriage and inheritance similarly suggest that he can be read as ‘female’ since endorsing such conventions only serves the interest on patriarchal culture.   
  
These feminist critics pursue the central opposition in the novel (that of nature and culture) in gendered terms, with culture as male and nature as female. We can see this in the manifestation of the storm as a female witch-child, the original Catherine’s ghost, in Lockwood’s dream in chapter three. This reading also supports the idea of Heathcliff as being ‘female’ since he has strong associations with nature and the wild. Heaven and hell are seen in similarly gendered terms; heaven being associated with Thrushcross Grange, Edgar Linton and culture; hell being the term most frequently applied to Heathcliff, nature and Wuthering Heights.  
  
They see Heathcliff as a figurative manifestation of a ‘whip’ (which Catherine desires from her father’s business trip) and as this whip, Heathcliff acts as an alternative self, or double for her ‘a complementary addition to her being who fleshes out all her lacks’(p.265). Catherine recognises this during her speech to Nelly in chapter nine.   
  
Gilbert and Gubar focus also on the issue of names in the novel, suggesting that the writing of the name Catherine, in its various manifestations (Earnshaw, Heathcliff, Linton) on the windowsill reveals the crucial lack of identity that is common to all women under patriarchy, ‘what Catherine, or any girl must learn is that she does not know her own name, and therefore cannot know who she is or whom she is destined to be’ (p.276).  
**MARXIST**  
  
SUMMARY Marxist literary theory tends to focus upon how the forces of society and economy determine and dictate narratives, characters and writers’ decisions about the texts they are writing. It is more a social theory; it explains what is going on in the world and the effect these happenings have over the world’s inhabitants. Marxist critics examine literature within the culture that produced it.   
  
**Kettle (1951) *^ An Introduction to the English Novel***

‘*Wuthering Heights* is about England in 1847. The people it reveals are not in a never-never land, but in Yorkshire. Heathcliff was not born in the pages of Byron, but in a Liverpool slum. The language of Nelly, Joseph and Hareton is the language of the Yorkshire people. The story of *WH* is concerned not with love in the abstract but with the passions of living people, with property ownership, the attraction of social comforts, the arrangement of marriages, the importance of education, the validity of religion, the relations of rich and poor.’  
  
Kettle goes on to examine how Heathcliff rebels against the values represented in *^ Wuthering Heights*, the values which reflect the specific tyranny of Victorian capitalist society.   
  
**Eagleton *Myths of Power: A Marxist study of the Brontës***

Eagleton sees the novel as centred around the eternal class conflict – between the landed gentry and the working classes. He sees Cathy’s seduction by the bourgeois glamour of the Grange as opposed to Heathcliff’s rejection of it. Heathcliff represents, for Eagleton, the turbulence of a mobile social workforce, who were moving in increasing numbers to urban areas looking for work. He reminds us of Heathcliff’s ambition:  
  
‘the triumph of seeing my descendents fairly lord of their estates! My child hiring their children to till their father’s land for wages’.   
  
Eagleton explores how Heathcliff is destructive to the established order because he has no social or domestic status. He disturbs the establishment because he has no legitimate place within its system. He is both a threat and an opportunity for it to be reinvented. Eagleton’s analysis turns on the issue of liberty and oppression. The fact that there is no opportunity for freedom either within or outside the system is a consequence of bourgeois society.  
Heathcliff learns to see that culture is a mode of oppression, and he acquires it to use as a weapon. This association of culture with violence is further played out throughout the novel.   
  
Heathcliff can be seen as a parody of capitalist activity, yet he is also a product of and a participant in that system. The contradiction of the novel, Eagleton claims, is that Heathcliff both embodies and antagonises the values which he wishes to contest.   
  
**POST COLONIAL**  
  
SUMMARY Post-colonial critics look specifically at how texts are characterised by the effect of Empire and colonialism; how this breeds racial discrimination and creates prejudiced attitudes within texts and characters. This is particularly prominent for Victorian literature – all of which is written on the back of a thriving empire, although *not* without its problems.  
  
**Meyer (1996)**

Heathcliff is described thoughout the novel as a ‘savage’; and although *what* he actually is remains unclear throughout, it is clear that this could refer to him as a half-caste, an outsider, or a slave brought in on slave ships docking at Liverpool, or he could be a famish Irish immigrant, escaping the Irish potato famine (rife at the time Emily Bronte was writing).

**FORMALIST**  
SUMMARY Formalist critics, quite simply, focus their analyses on form and structure over content; prioritises technique over substance.   
  
**Dorothy Van Ghent in *^ The English Novel: Form and Function***

Van Ghent was the first to identify the significance of the numerous windows and doors in this novel, arguing that such formal boundaries represent the tension between two conflicting realities. She draws attention to the ways in which different characters aim to cross these physical boundaries and unite the two kinds of reality, and argues that although for Catherine Earnshaw the attempt results in her death, suggesting that the choice is really about irreconcilable realities, by the end of the novel, Catherine Heathcliff does succeed in achieving the domestic romance.   
  
**PSYCHOANALYTIC**  
SUMMARY Freud believed the personality was split into three, and he named these three parts the ID, the EGO and the SUPEREGO. All three parts need to be present in equal amounts in order to have reasonable mental health.  
  
The ID functions in the *irrational* and *emotional* part of the mind. At birth a baby’s mind is all ID - *want want want*.  The Id is the primitive mind. It contains all the basic needs and feelings. It is the source for libido (sexual energy). And it has only one rule, the “pleasure principle”: “I want it and I want it all now”. Freud claimed these sublimated desires come forth to us in the form of **dreams** (see his seminal book *The Interpretation of Dreams*pub. 1900). If the ID is too strong or prevalent in a person’s personality, the result is self-gratification and being uncaring to others.

The EGO functions in the *rational* part of the mind. The EGO develops out of growing awareness that you can’t always get what you want. The EGO relates to the real world and operates via the “reality principle”.  The EGO realises the need for compromise and negotiates between the Id and the Superego.  The EGO's job is to get the Id's pleasures but to be reasonable and bear the long-term consequences in mind.  The EGO denies both instant gratification and pious delaying of gratification. If the EGO is prevalent in a person’s personality, the result is extreme rationality and efficiency, but one that can be cold, boring and distant.  
  
The SUPEREGO is the last part of the mind to develop.  It might be called the *moral* part of the mind. The SUPEREGO becomes an embodiment of parental and societal values. It stores and enforces rules. It constantly strives for perfection, even though this perfection ideal may be quite far from reality or possibility.  Its power to enforce rules comes from its ability to create *anxiety*. If the SUPEREGO is prevalent in a person’s personality, the result is extreme guilt all the time, and may even grow into an insufferably saintly personality.  
  
Jacques Lacan updates Freud’s theories with a focus primarily on the acquisition of language. He claims that a person’s development goes in three stages: the imaginary, the symbolic and the real.  
  
The IMAGINARY stage is the phase a child goes through before learning how to speak and crucially, is the stage in which the child negotiates the **^ MIRROR STAGE**. For the first 6 months of its life, a child is completely dependent on the mother, and doesn’t understand that, in fact, the mother and itself are separate beings; it cannot see where it ends and the mother ends.   
  
Lacan claims this ends when the child views itself in a mirror, as the child starts to recognise itself as a separate being from other beings around it, i.e. the mother. However, what it also does is believe that this image is real (it may try to touch the image thinking it is another person) before finally realising that the image is an image of the self, and it can control itself; it is *master* of its actions – that the mirror image IS itself.  
  
This self-delusion continues and the child develops, thinking of itself as its specula other, whilst all the time developing its EGO in relation to its previous ‘id’-like state and the gradual acquisition of language as it grows into a being of society. Therefore, the EGO is formed through an imaginary relationship with the self.   
  
The SYMBOLIC is similar to the SUPEREGO in that it is a system of rules (i.e. language) imposed on the self from outside (i.e. patriarchal society). Lacan argues that when we use language we are only really expressing what society determines for us, as it is a system constructed *for* us, not *by* us, crucially. We cannot express what ‘I’ think as ‘I’ don’t actually *know*. As soon as I use ‘I’, I am expressing what society has told me to express through language.   
  
[If we understand society and language to be a patriarchal construct (an ideology constructed by the dominant, masculine, ruling classes) we can begin to see how psychoanalysis and feminist literary theory can overlap.]  
  
The REAL is what ‘I’ can never express, and, Lacan argues, is what the real I actually is. It relates to the ID as we can not truly grasp what our Real selves are – it refers partly to a subconscious or pre-birth state. Lacan claims that we are all, ultimately, striving to return to this state of being. 

**Philip K. Wion**

Wion claims that *Wuthering Heights* is full of oral imagery. Almost all of the social encounters involve food, and food is one of the signs which signal belonging and acceptance. A delicate appetite, such as displayed by Isabella, and later Linton, might also be read as a reluctance to experience or engage with the sensual or physical.