Lockwood – a suitable guide? Narrative voice in wuthering heights

Lucy Webster takes Lockwood, the frame narrator of Wuthering Heights, and subjects him to close scrutiny, revealing the limitations in his narrative voice and showing how Brontë has used these to both break down the seeming oppositions in the novel and raise questions for the reader about the characters and themes.

Lockwood is one of the narrators of Wuthering Heights; all the other narratives (journals, letters, oral stories) are contained within his journal. The fact that he keeps a journal is significant as it contributes to his portrayal as an eighteenth-century gentleman. He is not simply a cipher for the narrative of Wuthering Heights. His character, his response to the characters and situation at Wuthering Heights (in 1801) and to the history of his landlord, Heathcliff, is significant. Lockwood is integral to Brontë’s exploration of violence, power, and the civilised rules and conventions of society. Despite the fact that it is a first person narrative the reader is quickly alerted to the fallibility of the narrator and to the contradictions in his consciously constructed character. This is important as it encourages the reader to be sceptical of the confident (superficial?) interpretations of characters and events offered by Lockwood.

Lockwood’s self-construction

Lockwood presents himself as a Romantic hero: sensitive, disillusioned, bored with society, and misanthropic. He constructs himself within a literary stereotype. His vocabulary and sentence structures are mannered, exaggerated, long winded:

do myself the honour of calling as soon as possible, after my arrival, to express the hope that I have not inconvenienced you by my perseverance in soliciting the occupation of Thrushcross Grange

The language is full of clichés – almost parodic of the polite society gentleman. The polite reader may perceive Lockwood as a suitable guide through the story which follows – someone who, despite his assertions that he desires ‘a situation so completely removed from the stir of society’, will interpret and make sense of and rationalise the emotions of Wuthering Heights. The alert reader, however, should already be aware of contradictions within the content and style of the narrative: Lockwood the misanthropist has sought company – and does again despite the chilly welcome he receives at the Heights; he asserts that he and Heathcliff ‘a capital fellow’ are ‘a suitable pair’. Surely ‘pair’ and ‘misanthropist’ are contradictions in terms. The language of Heathcliff and Lockwood is in stark contrast:

The ‘walk in’ was uttered with closed teeth.

Lockwood’s interpretation of Heathcliff as exaggeratedly reserved suggests that he assumes his misanthropy is also assumed. His second visit forces him to recognise the error of his initial perception:

The tone in which the words were said, revealed a genuine bad nature. I no longer felt inclined to call Heathcliff a capital fellow.

Lockwood’s failings

Misinterpretation is a key feature of these first scenes at Wuthering Heights. They encourage the reader to recognise Lockwood’s inability to interpret the situation on a literal level and therefore on metaphorical levels too:

– he mistakes a heap of dead rabbits as cats
– he repeatedly misinterprets the relationships between the characters.

The last example mirrors the reader’s sense of bewilderment. Unlike the reader, however, Lockwood complacently passes judgements on the characters and their relationships. This misinterpretation is closely linked to the critical exploration of polite society and the conventions which govern it. Lockwood fails to realise that these are not applicable within the world of Wuthering Heights. His crass self-confidence and sense of superiority is evident in his inability to realise how inappropriate his remarks are; he sees the reason for the failure of his polite conversation as lying with his hosts. The description of Lockwood attempting to find his way back to Thrushcross Grange over the marker-less, snow-covered moors exemplifies the failure of the conventions of polite society to chart the emotionally wild landscapes of Wuthering Heights – both internal and external: he is floundering and the reader is increasingly aware of this. The attempt to name, categorise, and interpret, and the failure to do so adequately is a dominant theme in the text. Given the eighteenth-century obsession with classification and rationalisation in all fields, this is a pertinent criticism of society.

Questioning oppositions

Contrary to the blithe assertions of the narrator, the first impression the reader receives of Lockwood and Heathcliff is that they are opposites. However, this oppositional relationship is quickly destabilised as the very ‘civilised’ Lockwood attempts to enter the Heights:

‘Wretched inmates!’ I ejaculated mentally ... ‘I will get in!’ ... So resolved I grasped the latch, and shook it vehemently.

and later more shockingly, in his ‘cruel’ treatment of the ‘creature’ at the window:

finding it useless to attempt shaking the creature off, I pulled its wrists on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bed-clothes.

The opposition between civilised and uncivilised is further deconstructed throughout Nelly’s narrative. Violence is presented as an unremarkable part of civilised domestic life in both the first and second generation: from the young Edgar and Isabella Linton fighting over the dog at Thrushcross Grange to Linton’s ‘wink[ing]’ at Heathcliff’s violent treatment of Catherine.

A failure to interpret

Lockwood’s response to the history of Catherine and Heathcliff is curious. He requests that Nelly ‘gossip’ about it as a diversion from the fever he contracts after his snowy walk from Wuthering Heights. In the first break in the narrative Nelly herself names and therefore dismisses ‘Heathcliff’s history’ which could have been told in ‘half a dozen words’ as a ‘tale’ which cannot ‘divert’. Lockwood insists he wishes her to continue the story in a ‘leisurely’ manner. He emphasises the ‘style’ and ‘manner’ of narration rather than the content, claiming only that he is ‘interested in every character you have mentioned, more or less’. As the ‘minute hand measure [reaches] half past one’ Nelly concludes the first part of her narrative. Lockwood does not comment on the events and characters he has heard of. His response refers only to himself.

In truth, I felt rather disposed to defer the sequel of her narrative myself

It is expressed in bland, emotionless language – a stark contrast to the emotional dialogue quoted by Nelly; this contrast is evident in the internal narrative itself: the highly charged language of the characters is enclosed within her own superficial moralising.

This lack of interpretation is significant as it leaves a gap in the narrative, a gap which the reader attempts to fill with interpretation and speculation. It is comparable to the absence in Cathy’s journal which is filled by Lockwood and the reader:

I suppose Catherine fulfilled her project, for the next sentence took up another subject.

It is not until a month later that Lockwood, no longer the misanthropic, dark and brooding hero but the sensitive convalescent hero, recalls the narrative he was being told. It is remembered only as something which will ‘amuse’ and pass the time. Heathcliff as landlord is mentioned in the paragraph preceding Lockwood’s recollection of the ‘chief incidents’ of the ‘tale’. Despite this our narrator makes no connection between the events of the internal story and the living characters he has met.

Yes, I remember her hero had run off, and never been heard of for three years: and the heroine was married.

Immediately his attention returns to his own condition: ‘she’ll be delighted to hear me talking cheerfully’. The tone is one of amused condescension. The superiority which Lockwood expressed when at Wuthering Heights underlies his comments here. At the conclusion of Nelly’s story Lockwood’s only comment is to outline his plans for the future, confirming our interpretation of his misanthropy as a whim only. The lack of response and interpretation is highlighted by Lockwood’s mild interest in and poor remembrance of his time at Thrushcross Grange when he passes close to Gimmerton later that year.

A failure to learn

Lockwood’s remarks as he leaves Wuthering Heights in January 1802 emphasise how little he has learned, how little the story, its emotions and characters have touched him. He reveals an inability to interpret characters other than by superficial social prejudices when he dismisses Hareton as a ‘clown’. He is horrified to think that Cathy ‘has thrown herself away upon that boor, from sheer ignorance that better individuals existed’. Throughout the text he assumes that Cathy will be only too grateful to marry him:

A sad pity – I must beware how I cause her to regret her choice.

The last reflection may seem conceited; it was not. My neighbour struck me as bordering on repulsive. I knew, through experience, that I was tolerably attractive.

He leaves Wuthering Heights convinced it would have been a fairy-tale privilege for Cathy to have been carried off to paradise – now based not in the isolation of ‘the perfect misanthropist’s Heaven’, but in the ‘stirring atmosphere of the town’.

What a realization of something more romantic than a fairy-tale it would have been for Mrs Linton Heathcliff had she and I struck up an attachment
Ironically, this explicit interpretation of his life as a romance helps breakdown the connection between story and reality – an opposition which is constantly threatened through the themes and structure of the text. It is this blurring of the boundaries which makes the reader uneasy about our (fallible) narrator’s comfortable enclosure of the violent and fatal emotions of the dead lovers, and the power struggles of the text.

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