**Representation of Women in Gothic Literature: Wuthering Heights**

Does Gothic fiction perpetuate stereotypes of women, or challenge them? A discussion concerning Emily Bront's 'Wuthering Heights'

The 'Gothic' is now considered to be an attempt to expose and explore the unconscious world of desires and fears that both society and the individual attempt to suppress. In short, Gothic writers are primarily interested in the breakdown of boundaries, in the exploration of what is forbidden, and in desires that should neither be spoken of nor acted upon. If one were to limit a definition to the above characteristics, however, it would be difficult to locate Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) firmly within the Gothic genre, as the majority of the conventional Gothic trappings have disappeared.

**Background/Context: Wuthering Heights**

Ever since its publication in 1847, *Wuthering Heights* has astounded and baffled readers. Emily Jane Brontë was born on 30 July 1818, the fifth child and fourth daughter of the Reverend Patrick Brontë, an Irish clergyman who held a succession of not very well-paid curacies in the North of England. Emily, along with her sisters Charlotte and Anne, all published their works under the guise of pseudonyms, in order to conceal their identities and perhaps even more importantly, their sex, for in the Nineteenth Century a double critical standard clearly operated: the power which stunned contemporary reviewers of *Wuthering Heights* if exercised by a male writer was one thing – permissible, even admired; in the hands of a woman, however, it could easily trespass the boundaries of good taste and become ‘coarse’.

That a decent, respectable woman could envisage such a tale, a tale characterised moreover by an astonishing amount of physical violence, was inconceivable to Emily Brontë’s readers. Therefore, does Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights,* a novel one can now approach without sexual prejudice, perpetuate or challenge Gothic stereotypes of women?

**Oppression and Strength**

*Wuthering Heights* takes an unconventional attitude towards gender identity. In the sexual potency of his Byronic savagery, it is possible to read Heathcliff as the personification of stereotypical masculinity and Isabella, in her tragic romantic infatuation with him, as manifesting a version of femininity which provides its exact counterpart.

However, in spite of such extremes, the novel offers an understanding of gender as demonstrably more oblique than this: Catherine and Isabella may adopt certain versions of ladylike femininity, but they are versions that are ultimately fatal. Edgar is described as both fair and slight, yet he is also referred to as ‘the master’, and he has the full weight of patriarchal privilege behind him; Heathcliff, by comparison, is an outcast, with no social position and no family until he contrives his own. Linton Heathcliff is presented as relentlessly effeminate, more convincing as Edgar Linton’s daughter than as Heathcliff’s son, according to Joseph.

Equally, Catherine’s energy, daring and mobility are more suggestive of conventional masculinity in the Nineteenth Century. In Romantic and Gothic literature, reader expectation anticipates an antagonistic opposition of male sexual rivalry; in *Wuthering Heights,* this antagonism would be between the legitimised patriarch, Edgar Linton, and the dark, Byronic outsider, Heathcliff.

The novel both appeals to and subverts stereotypical constructions of sex roles by suggesting that strategies for survival are gender-related. So, for example, Heathcliff responds to oppression by plotting revenge, whereas Catherine turns to self-destruction. However, Brontë does not permit us simply to regard one response as inherently masculine and the other as feminine, because she makes clear that these strategies are determined as much by circumstance as by gender; Isabella, for example, is inclined to violence, but lacks the means to inflict it:

*I surveyed the weapon inquisitively; a hideous notion struck me. How powerful I should be possessing such an instrument! I took it from his hand, and touched the blade. He looked astonished at the expression my face had assumed during a brief second. It was not horror, it was covetousness. He snatched the pistol back, jealously; shut the knife, and returned it to its concealment.*

Similarly, Catherine boxes Edgar’s ears for him on an early visit to Wuthering Heights, making him ‘afraid and ashamed’ of her.

**The Power of Women**

The reader is presented with a direct challenge to the stereotypical woman in the form of Catherine Earnshaw. Catherine appears to hold some apparent power within the novel, a power which she is aware of herself. She marries Linton rather than Heathcliff because her brother Hindley has turned Heathcliff into an impoverished servant at the Heights. ‘Did it never strike you,’ Catherine says to Nelly, ‘that if Heathcliff and I married, we should be beggars? Whereas if I marry Linton I can aid Heathcliff to rise, and place him out of my brother’s power.’

This can perhaps be seen as a challenge to stereotypes of women in the sense that females in the Gothic novel do not usually have the power to choose who they will marry. Yet Catherine’s decision to marry Linton is not wholly altruistic, as she is also attracted to the gentility of his social position; as she tells Nelly, Edgar is handsome and rich ‘and [she] shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighbourhood’.

Despite the apparent strength of the female characters, *Wuthering Heights* could also be looked upon as a novel about male power and female powerlessness: after Catherine marries Edgar, she feels incarcerated in her husband’s fine home and undergoes recurrent bouts of ‘brain fever’ when her will is checked or her desires are thwarted, and each time she falls ill she refuses to eat. Catherine starves herself as an act of rebellion and despair; selfish and passionate, she repeatedly refuses food when others refuse to allow her to have her way. On the contrary, Heathcliff has far more freedom: when Catherine rejects him he goes off and makes his fortune in order to become worthy of her and in order, too, to wreak revenge on all those who have thwarted their love, especially Linton and Hindley.

**Feminist Criticism of 'Wuthering Heights'**

When looking at *Wuthering Heights* in terms of feminist criticism, one has to be familiar with the definition of feminism and how feminist criticism works. In her 1981 essay ‘Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness’, Elaine Showalter identified three common modes of feminist literary theory, and placed them as modes belong to different national groups. She wrote:

*English feminist criticism, essentially Marxist, stresses oppression; French feminist criticism, essentially psychoanalytic, stresses repression; American feminist criticism, essentially textual, stresses expression. All, however, have become gynocentric. All are struggling to find a terminology that can rescue the feminine from its stereotypical associations with inferiority.*

In *The Madwoman in the Attic,* Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar interrogate *Wuthering Heights* in terms of what they term ‘feminist mythologies’. In their reading of the novel in terms of writing against the male tradition, they see *Wuthering Heights* as a ‘Bible of Hell’, a novel which validates the natural over the cultural, the anarchic over the world of organised repression.

Wuthering Heights, the house of the title, is hellish by conventional standards, but for Catherine and Heathcliff is represents the kind of non-hierarchal social space in which they are permitted a degree of power which would be denied them elsewhere, since she is female and he is illegitimate, thus they are both excluded from power in the conventional world.

Thrushcross Grange, home of the Linton family, represents the standards of patriarchal culture which will be triumphant by the end of the story, but which the novel itself, through its sympathies for Catherine and Heathcliff, implicitly attacks. This sustained gender reading of the novel sees Thrushcross Grange as cultured and discreet, and the polar opposite of Wuthering Heights. That Catherine emerges from the Grange ‘a lady’ is seen as an inevitable consequence of subjection to masculine mythologies about heaven.

**Conclusion**

In Catherine and Isabella, Brontë offers a radical challenge to these conventional assumptions, since rather than being offered in marriage by their fathers, as part of an economic transition, they both attempt to manipulate the parameters of the exchange. Nevertheless, this manipulation is doomed to failure, since the dominant discourses require their submission, a submission which can be read as ultimately leading to their deaths.