**The Women of Wuthering Heights**

Judy Simons scrutinises the female characters in Wuthering Heights and finds they are, much like Emily Brontë herself, contradictory – ground-breaking yet rooted in convention.

‘Our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called ‘feminine’’, concluded Charlotte Brontë in a ‘biographical notice’ appended to the 1850 edition of Wuthering Heights. Emily’s work especially she noted was not ‘at all like the poetry women generally write’. In similar vein M. Heger, Principal of the Brussels boarding school where the two sisters lodged in 1842, remembered Emily as having a ‘powerful reason’ and a ‘strong, imperious will [that] would never have been daunted by opposition or difficulty’, attributes that were deeply contrary to the Victorian womanly ideal. ‘She should have been a man – a great navigator’, he declared, paying tribute to her innovative and pioneering spirit. Stories abound of Emily’s fearlessness, her unnatural strength and her feisty independence. These were so compelling that for over a century after its first publication it became customary to consider Wuthering Heights as virtually an extension of its author, a literary oddity deviating from a mainstream female tradition.

Conventions & Contradictions

For all its originality, however, Wuthering Heights is rooted in prevailing literary conventions. Its women characters find their counterparts in the domestic and Gothic fictions with which Emily was familiar, as well as reflecting and questioning the roles women play in those books and in the social order. One of the puzzling features of the legends surrounding the accounts of Emily’s character is their inherent contradictions – she appeared to be simultaneously a wild spirit and the most dutiful of daughters. One minute she is described tramping alone across the Yorkshire moors, learning how to shoot a pistol with deadly accuracy, or separating fighting dogs with her bare hands; the next she is seated in a corner of the family kitchen, sewing quietly, the picture of girlish modesty. These same contradictions pervade her writing.

From the very start of Wuthering Heights, and via the most unlikely source, the tedious and conformist Lockwood, the book introduces ideas about women and challenges expectations about female behaviours. It is no accident that the narrative opens with a man lost in a snowstorm on moorland trying to find shelter in a farmhouse kitchen, a place he might expect to be warm and welcoming, a refuge from the violent weather. The kitchen is traditionally a woman’s realm, a comforting domestic space, but not in Brontë’s scenario. Lockwood’s presumptions are cruelly shattered. Wuthering Heights is a predominantly male environment, as harsh and bleak as the landscape, and the kitchen has few saving graces. It lacks the ‘glitter of copper saucepans and tin cullenders’, and there are no obvious signs of ‘roasting, boiling or baking’, only instruments of violence, guns and pistols, and shadowy recesses hinting at mysteries within.

This initial view of the kitchen is sharply reversed at the end of the novel, set approximately a year later. In chapter 32, as Lockwood once again approaches the Heights, he encounters a series of surprises. There are no locked gates or windows, the sweet fragrance of a flower garden (with its associations of femininity) assails him and ‘a fine red fire illumined the chimney’, exuding good cheer and comfort. Inside the room, previously so forbidding, the two young people are reading together, their conversation interrupted with kisses. The younger Catherine has not only survived the savagery of Heathcliff’s rule over the Heights but has herself proved to be a civilising influence after his death. She tames both the victimised Hareton Earnshaw, the true inheritor of the ancestral home, and the house itself. Such a depiction of women as natural educators with refinement and taste was a standard of mid-nineteenth-century fiction. Charles Dickens, for instance, a contemporary of Emily Brontë, created heroines like Agnes Wickfield in David Copperfield, who were instinctive home-makers, transforming the crude lives of menfolk with subtle delicacy and charm. Catherine is firmly located within this tradition.

Passion and Desire

Although for most readers, Heathcliff remains the dominant figure of Wuthering Heights around whom critical debates still rage, his dramatic presence is used to throw into relief the four main women, in reaction to his insistent masculinity. Some of the earliest readers found him too much to take, and the Brontës were accused of creating situations and characters that typified ‘the eccentricities of ‘woman’s fantasy’. Yet in creating one of the most enduring anti-heroes of all time, Wuthering Heights explores the profound nature of erotic attraction and its resonance in the female imagination. Heathcliff is pictured as simultaneously wild and refined, a ‘dark-skinned gypsy’ with the ‘erect and handsome figure’ of a gentleman. Saturnine, obsessive, and capable of loving intensely, he corresponds both to the Byronic hero featured in the Romantic poetry that Emily adored, and to the fascinating villains of Gothic novels with their suggestively dangerous appetites. Both Catherine and Isabella, so different in type, find Heathcliff irresistible.

Catherine’s passion for Heathcliff is as discomfiting as it is overpowering but to deny her erotic urges becomes for her essentially a life-denying act. It is easy to see how the book has become a rich site for Freudian interpretations in its endorsement of a relationship formed from childhood bonding. Her marriage to the weak, some might say feminised, Edgar Linton is the first step on her road to inevitable destruction. From her unconventional and brutal upbringing, Catherine craves gentility and tenderness – these are the qualities Edgar seems to offer – but in rejecting Heathcliff, her attempts to suppress her own passionate nature only result in tragedy. In general, women writers of the period avoided confronting the difficult question of women’s sensuality – female desire was a taboo subject, its expression confined to sinners and monsters. Whilst Wuthering Heights is remarkable in recognising that passion can be a life force for women as well as men, it also concedes, in line with nineteenth-century thinking, that a heroine who succumbs to its power must suffer the fatal consequences.

Isabella Linton represents the other side of the coin, a typical middle-class young lady with romantic delusions. Beguiled by the popular novels she has read, Isabella sees in Heathcliff the palpable realisation of the fictional heroes she has imagined. Without the same reserves of passion as Catherine, she is drawn to the glamour of good looks and the allure of the unorthodox, expecting Heathcliff to fulfil her fantasies of finding a man who matches up to the exciting protagonists in books. But the reality turns from an erotic dream into a Gothic nightmare. Instead of satisfying her desires, Heathcliff emerges as the cruel villain not the hero of a romantic thriller, subjecting Isabella to a regime of psychological if not actual physical torture.

Women’s Vulnerability

The tyranny that Heathcliff exhibits is uncomfortably close to the unpleasant reality of many women’s lives in Victorian England, where wives were literally the property of their husbands, and could legitimately be persecuted with beatings, imprisonment in their homes, starvation and sexual violence. It was a familiar story, and persecution is a feature of both the extremism of Gothic tales and the more realistic domestic novels of the period. Heathcliff is also not the only man in the book to exercise an abusive power. When he becomes master of Wuthering Heights he merely perpetuates the oppression that he and Catherine suffered at the hands of Hindley Earnshaw, and that could be seen as the inevitable by-product of a patriarchal society which denies women independent status. The hanging of Isabella’s pet dog serves as an awful warning of the potential of his authority. It is ironic that in seeking freedom through marriage, Isabella moves from being her father’s possession to being owned by her husband. The female characters in Wuthering Heights are thus pivotal to the novel’s treatment of the recurrent nineteenth-century exploration of the theme of family, where women are shown as vulnerable, living in fear in an uncivilised male world.

Female Storytellers

And what of Nelly Dean, the key to the unfolding of the narrative? It should not be forgotten that Nelly, like the mistresses she serves, is also a woman, and the same age-group as Catherine Earnshaw. As Catherine’s foster sister, Nelly is her natural confidante and takes on the position of an intimate friend. She occupies a unique place in the family, and as a servant she is paradoxically freer in her movements than the other women in the novel. She uses the secrets with which she has been entrusted to weave a complicated and serialised chronicle that keeps the reader – or in Lockwood’s case the listener – enthralled. Nelly is the consummate storyteller, moving from one cliff-hanger to the next, always maintaining momentum and suspense. The tradition of oral narrative, especially for family history, is one that was habitually the province of women, who passed down accounts of personal feuds, romantic adventures and financial disputes from one generation to the next. In a rural community where printed books were rare, women’s roles as unofficial keepers of the collective and domestic records were vital. Like Emily Brontë, Nelly is the female raconteur, spinning out a convoluted tale of revenge to her male audience of one. In so doing she also reflects the growing power of women storytellers in the nineteenth century.

Judy Simons is Emeritus Professor of English at De Montfort University.

This article first appeared in emagazine 56, April 2012.