

May 2017: *Wuthering Heights* as a love story

- b) *Wuthering Heights* is little more than a love story. With reference to Brontë's narrative methods, and relevant contextual information, show to what extent you agree with the above statement.

****NB:** In the following essay plan, I have used a colour-coding system whereby *narrative methods* are presented in red, *context* is presented in green and *quotations* are highlighted.**

Wuthering Heights is often hailed as one of the greatest love stories of all time because of its portrayal of the passionate relationship of Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw. Yet it would be wrong to conclude that *Wuthering Heights* is little more than a love story, because there is also evidence for seeing it as a novel of social criticism and a Gothic novel. It is arguably more accurate to say that Brontë draws on elements of all of these genres to present a complex and thought-provoking picture of human relationships.

It is hard to deny that *Wuthering Heights* is above all the love story of Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff, because all of the novel's conflict springs from their frustrated relationship.

- The fact that their love is thwarted by their class differences and Hindley's efforts to divide them allows us to compare *Wuthering Heights* to other stories of forbidden love such as *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) and Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), both of which depict romantic relationships thwarted by external forces.
- Brontë draws attention to the class divisions in nineteenth-century England that make it impossible for a middle-class female like Catherine to marry an orphan like Heathcliff through Catherine's admission to Nelly in Chapter IX that 'It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now'.

The novel's structure supports the idea that it is above all else a love story.

- Volume I charts the development of Catherine and Heathcliff's relationship from their childhood up until Catherine's death, and while Volume II focuses largely on the implementation of Heathcliff's revenge scheme, his relationship with Catherine is brought to a conclusion at the end of the novel through the implication that is reunited with her ghost prior to his death.
- Brontë implies that Heathcliff and Catherine's love transcends death through the image of the 'strange, joyful glitter in [Heathcliff's] eyes', which is used to suggest that he has seen her apparition, and her use of direct speech to report the shepherd boy's sighting of their ghosts at the end of the novel following Heathcliff's death: "There's Heathcliff and a woman, yonder, under t'nab".

Brontë's introduction of a second love story into Volume II provides further evidence for viewing *Wuthering Heights* as little more than a love story.

- Catherine and Hareton's relationship parallels that of Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff in some respects, in that both couples come from different backgrounds and are kept apart by a malicious guardian. However, they ultimately overcome the forces working against them to forge a happy relationship.
- The fact that *Wuthering Heights* concludes with the news of Catherine and Hareton's marriage aligns the novel with other love stories with happy endings such as *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), which ends with the marriage of Elizabeth and Mr Darcy.

- Brontë uses **images** of cozy domesticity upon Lockwood's return to Wuthering Heights to emphasize the uplifting ending to Catherine and Hareton's love story. Lockwood's observation that 'a fragrance of stocks and wallflowers wafted on the air' and 'a fine, red fire illuminated the chimney' contrasts starkly with the **symbols** of hostility he encountered on his earlier visits – the dogs, the 'chain' on the gate and the 'barred' doors – and suggests that their love has transformed the dwelling's atmosphere.

Another reason for seeing *Wuthering Heights* as a love story is Brontë's use of poetic language to capture the intensity of Catherine and Heathcliff's feelings.

- In Chapter IX, Brontë uses **contrastive nature similes** to emphasize the transcendent nature of Catherine's love for Heathcliff, seen when she tells Nelly her love for Linton 'is like the foliage in the woods' but that her love for Heathcliff 'resembles the eternal rocks beneath'.
- The extent to which Catherine identifies with Heathcliff is also revealed through the **passionate tone** of her **exclamation**: 'Nelly, I am Heathcliff!'
- Heathcliff's love for Catherine, meanwhile, is clear from the **anguished tone** of his **exclamations** upon hearing of her death – 'Oh God! it is unutterable! I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!'.

However, to say that *Wuthering Heights* is little more than a love story is to overlook the fact that Brontë subverts the conventions of popular romance in a number of ways.

- Conventional love stories tend to support traditional values and idealize male/female relationships. For instance, the romantic entanglements in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1859) are resolved through the marriage of Donald Farfrae and Elizabeth-Jane Henchard, two characters who embody nineteenth-century expectations about appropriate behaviour.
- In *Wuthering Heights*, however, Brontë presents a more complex picture of romantic relationships. For instance, she alludes to the violence in Heathcliff and Isabella's relationship through the **image** contained in Isabella's report that 'He shook me till my teeth rattled', and she challenges the idea that women ought to be submissive through her portrayal of Isabella's escape.
- Furthermore, neither Catherine Earnshaw nor Heathcliff can be seen as conventional romantic protagonists because their behaviour challenges the dominant norms of their era. Heathcliff is savage and cruel, as illustrated by his use of **pejorative adjectives** and a **derogatory animal metaphor** to refer to Isabella as a 'pitiful, slavish, mean-minded brach', while Catherine defies her husband's authority, as illustrated when she undermines his masculinity using a **contemptuous tone** and a **derogatory animal metaphor**: 'Your type is not a lamb, it's a sucking leveret.'

The idea that *Wuthering Heights* is little more than a love story can also be challenged on the basis that the novel provides an insight into the social conditions of nineteenth-century England.

- As well as telling a love story, Brontë's portrayal of the love triangle between Catherine, Edgar and Heathcliff illustrates **the rigid class divisions in nineteenth-century English society**. The fact that Catherine loves Heathcliff but feels compelled to marry Edgar for social reasons **highlights the extent to which class dictated a person's behaviour**.
- Catherine's decision to marry Edgar tells us something about the limited options available to nineteenth-century women, too. **The only form of respectable employment available to unmarried middle-class women was to work as a schoolteacher or a governess, and these roles would not have been well paid. Therefore, the only way a woman could elevate her social class was through marriage.** Catherine's awareness that marrying Edgar represents

an opportunity to raise her status is evidenced by her observation that ‘he will be rich, and I shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighbourhood’.

- The social stratification of nineteenth-century England is also represented in the characters’ different styles of speaking. Nelly highlights the differences between her speech and Lockwood’s when she tells him that Edgar ‘pronounced his words as you do’, while Joseph’s lower social status is reflected in the way Brontë renders his speech in **Yorkshire dialect**: ‘yah’ll niver mend o’yer ill ways, but goa raight to t’ divil’.

A key argument against seeing *Wuthering Heights* as little more than a love story is that Brontë uses its presentation of romantic relationships as a vehicle for social criticism.

- Through the contrast between Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff’s relationship and that of Catherine Linton and Hareton, Brontë shows what can be achieved when people approach others with compassion and understanding.
- While Catherine and Heathcliff’s love is intensely passionate, Brontë also shows it to be rooted in selfishness. Far from enhancing his engagement with the world, Heathcliff’s love for Catherine fuels his hatred for other characters. It also leads him to spurn any meaningful connection with the divine, as seen in the way he dismisses Nelly’s attempts to convince him to call a minister by telling her ‘I have nearly attained *my* heaven’, with Brontë’s **italicization of the possession pronoun ‘my’** underscoring Heathcliff’s state of self-imposed alienation.
- Contrastingly, Brontë shows that Catherine Linton and Hareton have to extend the boundaries of their selves before their relationship can blossom. Though her portrayal of their efforts to accommodate one another’s differences, **symbolized** by the **image** of ‘her light, shining ringlets blending, at intervals, with his brown locks’ as they read together in Chapter XXXII, she implies that only love founded on empathy can help to bring about an ideal society.

A further challenge to seeing *Wuthering Heights* as little more than a love story lies in its focus on the theme of revenge, which allows us to see it as a Gothic novel.

- A desire for vengeance is a defining trait of the Gothic villain, as illustrated by Shelley’s portrayal of the demonic protagonist of his novel *Zastrozzi* (1810), who seeks revenge against his half-brother, Verezzi.
- Heathcliff’s obsession with revenge is reflected in fact that **Volume II centres around the implementation of his plot to seek revenge on Hindley and Edgar by securing possession of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange and destroying their offspring’s happiness.**
- Heathcliff’s vengefulness is revealed through the way he forces Hindley’s son, Hareton, to ‘live in his own house as a servant’. Brontë uses a **tree metaphor** to indicate Heathcliff’s determination to reduce Hareton to the same lowly state to which Hindley reduced him: ‘we’ll see if one tree won’t grow as crooked as another, with the same wind to twist it!’

Additional support for seeing *Wuthering Heights* as a Gothic novel as opposed to a love story lies in Brontë’s presentation of Heathcliff as a Gothic villain.

- The archetypal Gothic villain is cruel and acts in shockingly immoral ways. For instance, the monster in *Frankenstein* (1818) brutally murders the narrator’s wife, Elizabeth, on their wedding day.
- Heathcliff demonstrates his disregard for moral codes when he hangs Isabella’s dog and bribes the sexton ‘to remove the earth off [Catherine’s] coffin-lid’ before opening it. While this **image** could be said to support the idea that *Wuthering Heights* is a love story by showing the lengths to which Heathcliff is prepared to go to be reunited with Catherine, his actions are arguably more depraved than romantic.

- Heathcliff's cruelty, meanwhile, is reinforced through Brontë's use of a violent **animal metaphor** to highlight his lack of compassion: 'I have no pity! The more the worms writhe, the more I yearn to crush out their entrails!'
- Additional evidence for seeing Heathcliff as a Gothic villain lies in the way characters describe him using **nouns relating to the supernatural** to emphasize his inhumanity. Nelly ponders, 'Is he a ghoul or a vampire?', while Isabella refers to him as an 'incarnate goblin'.

Other stylistic elements of the novel strengthen the case for viewing it as a Gothic novel as opposed to merely a love story.

- Gothic literature is concerned with creating an atmosphere of suspense and horror, and as such, it typically contains references to the supernatural and demonstrations of intense emotion.
- These features abound in *Wuthering Heights*. Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw's intense emotions are conveyed through Brontë's use of **dramatic imagery** to describe Catherine's emotional torment after arguing with Edgar – 'her eyes flashing, the muscles in her neck and arms standing out preternaturally' – and her use of an **animal simile** to convey Heathcliff's grief upon hearing of Catherine's death, describing how he 'howled... like a savage beast'.
- Brontë's use of **pathetic fallacy**, which is commonly used in the Gothic novel to reflect characters' emotions, also serves to intensify her depiction of the love story between Catherine and Heathcliff. For instance, her use of **violent natural imagery** to describe the storm that rages on the night Heathcliff flees Wuthering Heights illustrates his intense suffering: 'the storm came rattling over the Heights in full fury'.
- The novel also depicts several supernatural occurrences, of which Lockwood's dream about Catherine Earnshaw's ghost is one example. Brontë's use of **violent imagery** to describe how Lockwood 'pulled its wrist on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down' creates an eerie atmosphere and aligns *Wuthering Heights* with other Gothic novels like *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), which relates the experiences of a governess who goes to work at a haunted house.

This discussion has shown that Brontë's portrayal of romantic relationships in *Wuthering Heights* is interwoven with social criticism and elements typical of the Gothic novel. For this reason, it seems a vast oversimplification to say that *Wuthering Heights* is little more than a love story. It is perhaps more accurate to say that Brontë use her depiction of different types of love to dramatize the destructive consequences of relationships rooted in selfishness and highlight the rewards of relationships based on humility and empathy.