

WUTHERING HEIGHTS

Wuthering Height as a Romantic Novel

Contextual information about Romanticism

Romanticism was a literary and artistic movement that began in Europe in the late 1790s and lasted until the mid-nineteenth century. The Brontës would have been familiar with the writings of the English Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats, and Emily Brontë would most likely have been exposed to the German Romantics when she and Charlotte studied the German language and literature at a private school in Brussels.

Romantic literature is defined by the following characteristics:

- Rejects rules and conventions and emphasises the freedom of the individual to create their own destiny (i.e. personal conscience seen as more important than rules of church or government)
- Emphasises emotion and intuition over rationality
- Values the imagination over reality
- Celebrates nature as a source of refuge and spirituality and disparages civilization and urban life in particular (i.e. views humankind in nature as being morally superior to civilized humanity)
- Exotic or supernatural settings and events
- Deals with themes and characters in a symbolic and unrealistic way

In what ways can Wuthering Heights be viewed as a Romantic novel?

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

Wuthering Heights can be viewed as a Romantic novel because it takes place in an isolated rural setting and presents nature as a powerful spiritual force.

- The Romantics tended to disparage urban settings and viewed nature as a source of refuge from the noise and pollution brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Brontë displays a similar preference for remote natural settings over urban life by setting Wuthering Heights in rural Yorkshire. In the opening pages, Lockwood describes the novel's two homesteads as being 'completely removed from the stir of society', and Brontë uses vivid natural imagery to emphasize the remoteness and harshness of Wuthering Heights' situation in particular, noting that it sits on a 'bleak hill-top' and is subjected to 'pure, bracing ventilation... at all times'.
- Brontë's descriptions of the natural world reflect the influence of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats in the way they identify nature as a source of spirituality and freedom. The legacy of the Romantics can be detected in Brontë's use of a series of natural images to describe Catherine Linton's 'perfect idea of heaven's happiness', where it is specifically the wildness of nature that is celebrated: 'rocking in a rustling green tree, with a west wind blowing, and bright white clouds flitting rapidly above...' Catherine Earnshaw expresses a similar longing for nature during her illness, declaring that 'I'm sure I should be myself were I once among the heather on those hills'.
- Brontë's debt to the Romantics' view of nature is also reflected in her use of pathetic fallacy to convey the emotional turmoil of the novel's characters. Her

description of the storm that rages on the night Heathcliff flees Wuthering Heights provides an illustration of his and Catherine's intense suffering: 'the storm came rattling over the Heights in full fury'. Lockwood's visit to Wuthering Heights when he dreams about Catherine's ghost also takes place on 'a dark night', and Brontë's use of **imagery** to describe the sky and hills blurring into 'one bitter whirl of wind and suffocating snow' can be seen as **symbolizing** the inhospitable atmosphere he encounters at Wuthering Heights.

***Wuthering Heights* can also be seen as a Romantic novel because its action is marked by displays of passion and emotional intensity.**

- Through their frequent emotional outbursts, Brontë makes it clear that Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw are ruled by emotion as opposed to rationality. **Such emphasis on the world of emotion aligns *Wuthering Heights* with the Romantic movement, which valued feelings over logic and reason. The Romantic poets' emphasis on emotion is reflected in the way Keats expresses his desire in a letter to a friend written in 1817 'for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!'**
- The intensity of Catherine's feelings for Heathcliff are reflected in the **impassioned tone** she uses to declare her love for him – 'Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff!' – and Nelly's observation that she 'never had power to conceal her passion, it always set her whole complexion in a blaze' – a **metaphor** that emphasizes her inability to contain her strong emotions. Brontë also uses **dramatic and grotesque imagery** to show how Catherine's intense emotions drive her to the brink of madness: after arguing with Edgar about Heathcliff, her emotional torment manifests through her demonic appearance: 'she started up... her eyes flashing, the muscles in her neck and arms standing out preternaturally'.
- The **despair-filled tone** of Heathcliff's **exclamations** upon hearing of Catherine's death – 'Oh God! it is unutterable! I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!' – similarly reveals his capacity to feel intensely.

An additional reason for viewing *Wuthering Heights* as a Romantic novel is that it depicts supernatural events.

- **The Romantic poets often incorporated supernatural elements into their works because of their desire to explore unseen forces and escape the constraints of reason. Coleridge's poem 'Christabel', which recounts the tale of an innocent young woman who falls under a witch's spell, is an example of a Romantic poem containing supernatural elements.**
- Lockwood's encounter with Catherine Earnshaw's ghost, which is vividly rendered through Brontë's use of **tactile imagery** to report how Lockwood's fingers 'closed on the fingers of a little, ice-hold hand', can be considered a supernatural event that serves to distance the novel from the real world in a way that is typical of Romantic literature.
- There are also frequent references to premonitions and forebodings throughout the novel, as well as discussions of death and the afterlife, which point to the existence of a world beyond the purely physical. **The Romantic insistence on the existence of a metaphysical world** can be traced in Brontë's use of **imagery** in Chapter XXXIII to imply that Heathcliff is communicating with Catherine's ghost, as seen in Nelly's description that 'he gazed at something within two yards' distance'.

The fact that the plot of *Wuthering Heights* around the tension between the opposing forces of nature and civilization provides further evidence for seeing it as a Romantic novel.

- The dwellings of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange can be viewed **symbolically**, with Wuthering Heights representing nature, wildness and passion on one hand and Thrushcross Grange representing the opposing force of culture, civilization and refinement on the other. The contrast between the two worlds is reflected in the way Brontë **juxtaposes images** of Thrushcross Grange's opulent interior – 'a splendid place carpeted with crimson... and a pure white ceiling bordered by gold' – with **images** of Wuthering Heights's more rustic appearance: 'The floor was a smooth, white stone; the chairs, high-backed, primitive structures, painted green'.
- The contrast between the worlds represented by Edgar and Heathcliff's characters is also conveyed through Brontë's **juxtaposition of nature metaphors** to emphasise the difference in their characters, with Nelly describing Heathcliff as 'a bleak, hilly, coal country' and Edgar as 'a beautiful fertile valley'.
- The **Romantic tendency to idealize nature and denigrate civilized society** is arguably reflected in the way Brontë portrays the Linton children as weak and spoilt. Brontë uses a **violent simile** in Heathcliff's report of how he and Catherine spied on the Lintons to describe Isabella 'shrieking as if witches were running red-hot needles into her' as she and Edgar argued over a dog, and this humorous description of her over-the-top reaction could be seen as Brontë's attempt to expose the absurdity of certain aspects of civilized society.
- The **Romantic preference for the world of nature over the world of civilization** is also reflected in the way the moors act as a **symbol** of freedom and non-conformity throughout the novel, as evidenced by Nelly's observation that 'it was one of [Catherine and Heathcliff's] chief amusements to run away to the moors in the morning and remain there all day'.

Catherine Earnshaw can be seen as a typical nineteenth-century Romantic heroine in the way she rejects nineteenth-century ideas of appropriate female behaviour.

- The **Romantic movement valued individual conscience over the rules of church or state** and Romantic writers frequently depicted characters who challenge social conventions. Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) can be considered a typical nineteenth-century Romantic heroine because she is opinionated and prefers being outdoors to engaging in indoor pursuits. In this way she contradicts the nineteenth-century expectation that women should be demure and submissive.
- Catherine Earnshaw can be seen as a Romantic heroine because she challenges convention by running wild on the moors with Heathcliff as a child instead of pursuing 'ladylike' indoor activities. Her contempt for social conventions is also revealed through Nelly's recollection of her 'turning Joseph's religious curses into ridicule' and her observation that Catherine and Heathcliff 'both promised to grow up as rude as savages', a **simile** that emphasizes her rejection of social norms.
- Catherine can also be seen as a typical nineteenth-century Romantic heroine because she challenges her husband's authority. A 1824 marriage manual by Elizabeth Lanfear entitled *Letters to Young Ladies on Their Entrance into the World* observed that 'A sensible woman, to preserve the peace and secure the affections of her husband, will often sacrifice her own inclinations to his.' However, a number of nineteenth-century novels present Romantic heroines who stand up to male authority. One example is *Jane Eyre* (1847), whose heroine refuses to address her cousin John Reed as Master Reed and later on addresses her love interest, Mr Rochester, as her intellectual equal. Catherine Earnshaw demonstrates a similar disregard for patriarchal authority when she responds to Edgar's attempts to pressure her into renouncing contact with Heathcliff by unleashing a string of furious **exclamations** filled with strong **modal verbs** and an

imperative commanding him to leave the room: ‘I require to be let alone! ... Edgar, you – you leave me!’ Her refusal to submit to her husband’s authority strengthens the argument for viewing her as a Romantic heroine by aligning her with characters like Jane Eyre who demand to be recognized as men’s equals.

Another reason for viewing Wuthering Heights as a Romantic novel is that there are arguments for seeing Heathcliff as a Byronic hero, a figure associated with Romantic literature.

- The Romantic poet Lord Byron is credited as having invented the Byronic hero in his poem *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812), which recounted the adventures of a dark and brooding protagonist, and the term has since come to denote a passionate, sensitive, self-destructive loner who demonstrates distaste for society’s conventions and rejects or has been rejected by society.
- Heathcliff clearly displays some of these characteristics: he dwells obsessively on injustices perpetrated against him, lives according to his own philosophy and feels with passionate intensity. Heathcliff’s passion is clear from the **images** Brontë uses to convey his strong emotions upon being reunited with Catherine on her deathbed – ‘His eyes... flashed fiercely on her; his breast heaved convulsively’ – and the **violent imagery and animal simile** she uses to describe how he ‘dashed his head against the knotted trunk’ of a tree and ‘howled... like a savage beast’ upon hearing of Catherine’s death.
- Heathcliff’s outsider status and his rejection of social norms provide additional evidence for seeing him as a Byronic hero. Lockwood’s description of Heathcliff as a ‘dark-skinned gypsy’ identifies him as a social outsider, while Nelly’s description of his appearance upon his return to Wuthering Heights is congruent with the physical characteristics of the Byronic hero. Brontë describes him using **imagery** that emphasizes his physical attractiveness – ‘a tall, athletic, well-formed man’ – and notes his ‘eyes full of black fire’. The **fire metaphor** in this latter **image** links Heathcliff with the Romantic figure of the Byronic hero by hinting at his inner turmoil.

In what ways is Wuthering Heights not a Romantic novel?

There is arguably more evidence for viewing *Wuthering Heights* as a Gothic novel than a Romantic novel.

- The novel exhibits several features that align it with the genre of Gothic literature, which developed as an offshoot of the wider Romantic movement. Gothic novels share the Romantic novel’s emphasis on strong emotion and the imagination, but they are specifically concerned with cultivating an atmosphere of fear, suspense and horror. As such, they typically feature a villain who is merciless and intent on seeking revenge; for instance, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1810) charts the heinous crimes of a monster who seeks revenge on his creator. They also tend to depict violent and supernatural events. For instance, Henry James’s novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) relates the experiences of a governess who goes to work at a haunted house.
- The supernatural occurrences in Wuthering Heights arguably align it more closely with the Gothic novel than the Romantic novel, since Brontë’s use of **grotesque imagery** to describe how Lockwood pulled the wrist of Catherine’s ghost ‘on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down’ generates an atmosphere of horror.
- The shocking extent of Heathcliff’s malice and vengefulness also encourages us to view him as a Gothic villain as opposed to a Byronic hero. Heathcliff’s

obsession with getting revenge is reflected in the novel's structure. While the first volume charts the love story between him and Catherine Earnshaw, **Volume II focuses on the implementation of his revenge plot against Hindley and Edgar.** Heathcliff's vengefulness is also revealed through the way he punishes Hindley by depriving his son, Hareton, of education and forcing him 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 viewing Heathcliff as a Gothic villain is provided by Brontë's use of a violent **animal metaphor** in Chapter XIV to convey his lack of compassion: 'I have no pity! The more the worms writhe, the more I yearn to crush out their entrails!' Brontë also uses **Nelly's recollections of events** to emphasize Heathcliff's evilness. Nelly observes that after saving Hareton's life when Hindley dropped him over the bannister, Heathcliff's face betrayed his desire 'to remedy the mistake by smashing Hareton's skull on the steps' – a **violent image** that highlights his brutality and makes us more likely to see him as a Gothic villain than a Romantic hero.

The realistic elements in *Wuthering Heights* also present a barrier to viewing it solely as a Romantic novel.

- Despite its remote setting and its supernatural elements, Brontë faithfully depicts nineteenth-century social conditions and characters remain subject to the constraints of the social hierarchy. For instance, Catherine's decision to marry Edgar shows that she is bound by nineteenth-century class distinctions and attitudes towards marriage, as evidenced by her observation in Chapter IX that 'It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now'. Equally, Heathcliff is marginalized on the basis of his orphan status, and he is only able to achieve ownership of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange by acts of cunning and manipulation. The prejudice to which orphans were subjected is reflected in Mrs Earnshaw's use of the derogatory term 'gipsy brat' to refer to Heathcliff. Brontë's depiction of nineteenth-century social conditions in the novel might lead us to view it in some regards as a realist novel as well as a Romantic novel.

A further argument against seeing *Wuthering Heights* as a Romantic novel is that it does not unequivocally exalt nature and instinct over culture and civilization. If anything, its ending suggests that the ideal society is one in which nature and civilization are fully integrated.

- While the novel identifies nature as a source of freedom and spirituality, its plot nevertheless implies that total rejection of society's norms and values is not a viable solution to dealing with its problems. The fact that Catherine Linton and Hareton move to Thrushcross Grange at the end of the novel suggests that some amount of 'civilising' is necessary and desirable.
- Furthermore, nature is depicted as cruel and inhospitable as well as being a source of sanctuary: Lockwood loses his way on the snow-covered moors, the hilltop on which Wuthering Heights is situated is described using **adjectives** and **images** with negative connotations, such as 'bleak' and 'hard with a black frost', and Catherine warns Isabella that Heathcliff, the character most closely aligned with nature, is 'an arid wilderness of furze and whinstone' – a **metaphor** that presents him as dangerous and hard-hearted.