

Wuthering Heights reading guide

About the Book

Mr. Lockwood has recently taken lodgings in Thrushcross Grange and calls upon his landlord and neighbour, Heathcliff at Wuthering Heights. He is shocked by the rough and hostile reception by the whole household, but a severe snow storm means he is forced to spend the night. He is led to a bedroom by the servant Joseph where he initially unable to sleep, and looking in the old books he finds in the room, he reads a girl's name written on the flyleaf, next to three different surnames: Earnshaw, Linton and Heathcliff.

During the night Lockwood is woken by what he takes to be a vivid and disturbing dream of a woman's voice, and someone or something attempting open his bedroom window. Heathcliff is woken by Lockwood's terrified cries, but reacts strangely when he is told about the voice. Lockwood refuses to stay any longer and walks home across the moor. He develops a fever after his night in the cold, and as he convalesces, he asks his housekeeper Nelly Dean to recounts the story of his landlord and the strange household at the Heights.

Nelly's narrative begins many years before when Old Mr Earnshaw arrives home with a young child he has rescued from a life on the streets. The boy, Heathcliff, is hated and tormented by Old Mr Earnshaw's son Hindley, but he quickly forms a strong attachment to the daughter Catherine. After Hindley leaves for college Catherine and Heathcliff become inseparable, and run wild on the moors.

Following the deaths of both Old Mr & Mrs Earnshaw, Hindley becomes the head of the house with his young wife, Frances. Everything changes for Heathcliff: his education is terminated and he is banished to the servant quarters, but the powerful bond between him and Catherine only grows stronger. One day, while the pair spy on their neighbours the Lintons at Thrushcross Grange, Catherine is injured. With her movements restricted, Catherine must stay with the Lintons and Heathcliff is forbidden to see her.

When Catherine returns from Thrushcross Grange, she is a changed person: gone is the wild girl and in her place is a refined young woman, who has grown attached to the Linton siblings, Edgar and Isabella. Her affection for Heathcliff remains as ardent, but their relationship is strained and stormy. Soon after, Frances dies giving birth to a son, Hareton, and a devastated Hindley retreats into drinking and gambling, leaving Nelly to bring up his son. Edgar Linton proposes to Catherine, and while she is fond of Edgar and accustomed to the Linton's luxurious lifestyle, she is torn by her love for Heathcliff. After overhearing Catherine discussing the proposal with Nelly, Heathcliff disappears from Wuthering Heights. Catherine marries Edgar.

Three years later, Heathcliff returns as a rich gentleman. His presence and the mutual passionate love between him and Catherine threatens her marriage to Edgar. The situation comes to a dramatic climax in a confrontation that forces the pregnant Catherine to her bed with brain fever. As Edgar nurses his feverish wife, his sister Isabella elopes with

Heathcliff, who has tricked her into thinking he loves her. Edgar disowns her and concentrates on Catherine, whose condition is growing worse day-by-day. After giving birth to her daughter Cathy, she dies in Heathcliff's arms. Isabella has quickly learnt the true vindictive reason why Heathcliff married her – she escapes and moves to London where she gives birth to her son, Linton.

Young Cathy grows up with her father and the presence of her uncle Hindley and family house across the moor is kept a secret. Isabella dies and her cousin Linton comes to live at Thrushcross Grange. But when Heathcliff eventually discovers Linton, he forcibly reclaims his son. Though forbidden by her dying father, Cathy visits Linton at Wuthering Heights in secret, aided by Heathcliff, who eventually forces Cathy to marry the sickly Linton. Through the union of the two cousins Heathcliff gains control of the Grange when Edgar dies. Shortly after their marriage Linton also dies leaving Cathy angry, bitter and alone at Wuthering Heights.

This is where Nelly ends her narrative. Mr Lockwood's health causes him to leave Thrushcross, but he returns a year later and visits Wuthering Heights where Nelly recounts what happened in his absence.

Heathcliff maintained a tyrannical, vindictive hold over the members of his household, revelling in the hate he inspires in Cathy and Hindley and his power over Hareton. Hareton falls in love with Cathy despite her contempt of him, and tries to improve himself. Heathcliff seems to suffer a mental breakdown, tormented by ghosts and supernatural visions he destroys himself, and dies. Without his tormenting influence, Cathy and Hareton are free to fall in love, and eventually marry.

'This brilliantly atmospheric Yorkshire saga has only one drawback – Emily never wrote another novel. For me, it is both fantastic but also true to life because the protagonists have such believably fierce emotions' Kate Mosse

'When I was 16 I read *Wuthering Heights* for the first time, and I read it as a kind of oracle; that life is worth nothing if it is not worth everything. Disaster does not matter, intensity does. You can dilute *Wuthering Heights*, as Mills & Boon and musicals have done. But if you are honest, you cannot escape its central stark premise; all or nothing. The all is not Heathcliff – that is the sentimental version. The all is what Heathcliff represents, which is life itself' Jeanette Winterson

'It is as if Emily Brontë could tear up all that we know human beings by, and fill these unrecognizable transparencies with such a gust of life that they transcend reality' Virginia Woolf

'Only Emily Brontë exposes her imagination to the dark spirit' V. S. Pritchett

Characters list

Catherine Earnshaw - A beautiful and passionate heroine. Edgar Linton's wife and Cathy Linton's mother.

Heathcliff - A passionate, vengeful hero with mysterious origins.

Mr. Lockwood - tenant of Thrushcross Grange in 1801, he partly narrates the story of the families.

Edgar Linton - Catherine Earnshaw's gentle, loving husband. Cathy Linton's father and owner of Thrushcross Grange.

Isabella Linton - Edgar Linton's younger sister; Heathcliff's wife and Linton's mother.

Hindley Earnshaw - Catherine Earnshaw's older brother; Hareton's father.

Frances Earnshaw – Hindley's wife, Hareton's mother.

Catherine Linton - known as Cathy, only child of Catherine Earnshaw and Edgar Linton.

Hareton Earnshaw - son of Hindley and Frances Earnshaw.

Linton Heathcliff - sickly son of Heathcliff and Isabella Linton.

Joseph – servant to the masters of Wuthering Heights

Nelly Dean- housekeeper at Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange and narrator of the story.

Author biography

Emily Brontë was born on 30 July 1818 in Yorkshire. Her father, Patrick, was curate of Haworth Parsonage. In 1821, her mother, Maria, died of cancer leaving five daughters: Maria, Elizabeth, Charlotte, Emily and Anne and one son, Branwell.

In 1824 Charlotte, Maria, Elizabeth, and Emily were sent to Cowan Bridge, a school for clergymen's daughters, where Maria and Elizabeth both caught tuberculosis and died. The children were taught at home from this point on and together they created vivid fantasy worlds which they explored in their writing.

Emily initially taught as a governess and later travelled to Belgium with Charlotte in order to undertake further study. In 1846, along with Charlotte and Anne, Emily published a book of poems under the pseudonyms Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. After this all three sisters wrote novels. Emily's *Wuthering Heights* and Anne's *Agnes Grey* were both published in 1847. Charlotte's novel *The Professor* was initially rejected although she later published *Jane Eyre* to great success.

Emily developed tuberculosis and died on 19 December 1848. Her only novel has become a classic of English literature.

Discussion points

1. Heathcliff has traditionally been described as an attractive and romantic brooding hero.
 - a) What is attractive in his character? Can you understand the reasons that Catherine and Isabella fell in love with him?
 - b) Is he a hero?
2. To what extent is this novel about Heathcliff's revenge? What does he achieve?
3. 'A dark and passionate tale of tortured but enduring love' *Guardian* Does love endure throughout the book?
4. The novel has been described as a Gothic love story. Why do you think that Emily Brontë decided to use the gothic devices of the supernatural, an old mansion house and layered narratives to tell a love story? How does this change the way you read the book?
5. Supernatural visions inspire strong feelings and reactions from Mr Lockwood and Catherine. Are the visions supernatural or mental constructions?
6. *Wuthering Heights* is full of contrasts and duality between the first and second generation of characters. Look at:
 - a) the reasons why Cathy repeats her mother's mistakes
 - b) the similarities and differences between Heathcliff and Hareton
 - c) any other parallels that you have noted between characters
7. Joseph is an extremely religious but cruel man. What does this juxtaposition say about Emily Brontë's views on religion?
8. Nelly knows that Heathcliff is in the kitchen when Catherine talks about her feelings for Linton and Heathcliff. Why does she not reveal her knowledge? Can you think of other occasions when Nelly could have changed the outcome of the situation? What do her actions say about her character?
9. What role does the setting of the book play? Would the novel have worked if the story was set in an urban environment rather on the Yorkshire Moors? How important are the juxtapositions of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange?
10. Jeanette Winterson says that the book is about the concept of having 'all or nothing'. Do you agree with this statement?
11. Did you find the language of the story surprising? Do you think that it is different from other classic novels that you have read?

12. Is it a happy ending? Do you think the relationship between Cathy and Hareton is healthier and more promising than that of their parents?

Suggested further reading

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë (link to reading guide)

The Portrait of a Lady by Henry James (link to reading guide)

The Age of Innocence by Edith Wharton (link to reading guide)

The Turn of the Screw by Henry James (link to reading guide)

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall by Anne Brontë

Dracula by Bram Stoker (link to the reading guide)

Frankenstein by Mary Shelley

Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde by Robert Louis Stevenson (link to reading guide)

The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde

The Woman in Black by Susan Hill (link to reading guide) – where is this reading guide?

The Woman in White by Wilkie Collins (link to reading guide)

Online resources

The Brontë Society - <http://www.bronte.org.uk/>

The Brontë family - www.Brontefamily.org