

Wuthering Heights

Commentary by Jeffrey Allen Mays

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Opening Comments

The tragic events of the Bronte family accompany the fame of the novels themselves and provide commentary on the sisters' compositions unlike almost any other writer. It is well-known that upon bearing six children, the wife of Patrick Bronte, Maria, died in 1821, followed shortly after by two of the six in 1825. None of the Bronte children lived to old age. Their severe minister father and relative seclusion of the children are part of legend of the family and a source of wonder that girls so unacquainted with the world could write such enduring works. But for lack of time I'll not dwell further on background matters.

Some preview of reaction to the book has already been leaked and my opinion of WH was nearly foundered by scuttlebutt. But halfway through the book, I stopped to read some scholarly analysis and that colored the remainder of the story in my eyes. That opinion I will summarize and expand now.

Writing in 1959, Walter Allen, the 20th century novelist, English Professor, and literary critic, called *Wuthering Heights* "the perfect English novel", saying the Emily Bronte anticipated Joseph Conrad and DH Lawrence.

"Wuthering Heights is the most remarkable novel in English. It is perfect, and perfect in the rarest way; it is the complete bodying forth of an intensely individual apprehension of the nature of man and life. That is to say, the content is strange enough, indeed baffling enough, while the artistic expression of it is flawless. Artistically, neither Jane Austen nor Henry James nor Joseph Conrad, the great masters of form in the English novel, did anything to surpass it...No novel is imbued with the spirit of place than WH, but Emily Bronte makes use of no such set descriptive passages as we find variously in Scott, Dickens, George Eliot, Hardy or Lawrence. The reality of her characters cannot be questioned but their reality is of an utterly different kind from Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, George Eliot or Henry James."

Not possessing Allen's trained scholarly sense, we may wonder at this assessment, bewildered by Emily's bizarre, frenzied world and the phantasmagoria of creatures who appear especially in the opening chapters. But Allen's encomium encompasses the flawless unity of tone in WH, the consistency of the world Emily built, and unlike her sister's Charlotte's absurdly implausible plot in *Jane Eyre*, the fully adult and believable sequence of events. There are no precipitous chance meetings of friends in the teeming streets of London, no conveniently timely deaths or wrenched plot manipulations. The events and language, frenetic and intense though they may be, did not strain credulity within the world of the novel, but flowed reasonably within the structure of the narrative. Though we may have chuckled aloud at the excessive emotions, the seemingly overwrought dialog, all was completely consistent to the world that Emily created and were matched brilliantly by all nature and the habitat of Gimmerton and WH, and fully in line with the trajectory of Romanticism and gothic literature that was in full bloom.

Other novels of the period bear similar features. Frankenstein? The Rime of the Ancient Mariner? At Captain Ahab's mania? Or Lord Jim's? Much of the greatest 19th century and early modern literature feature ogres and phantasms at the pen of both male and female writers. Some are in their middle or elderly years, and some as in the case of Emily Bronte are possessed of a literary genius even at a young age and somehow without decades of worldly experience and travel. Other novelists create garish situations such as a maniac voyage to wreak personal vengeance upon a giant fish. Some invent otherworldly goblins. Emily was the first to couple a harrowing British setting with villainous characters and jarring, unnatural, unfamiliar dialogic manner. Her invention is alien and unique in all of literature. But inside the world she created it fits perfectly, and thus she achieved what novelists dream of achieving – taking the reader into a different world and casting a seamless dream with perfect symmetry, and perfect consistency within the world in which it exists, which is not the world of realism and not subject to the standards of 20th century writers and realism.

Of the story itself, I will only observe that Heathcliff, the fiend, created a hell on earth for all around him, turning events to bring about his vengeance upon all who scorned him as well as those who loved him. Isabelle found her girlish fantasy of infatuation to be a fishhook that brought her in and then imprisoned her at WH without female companion, servant, family, or friend, and a husband who made no secret of his loathing disdain for her from long before her enchantment with him.

The young Hareton was possessed by Heathcliff when Hindley died, and Edgar was too lethargic to claim him. Hareton who should have been "first gentleman of the neighborhood" following his profligate father's demise became a prisoner and chattel of Heathcliff, and the subject of his private fancy to try his hand at raising a child.

Linton was later brought in and subjugated, as was Cathy.

Good-hearted and sensible Nelly alone managed to elude his final grasp although she was wrenched to do his bidding carrying messages and whatnot numerous times.

And of course, Heathcliff and Catherine's mutual maniacal enslavement is the hinge upon which the book turns. Heathcliff himself could be said to be enslaved to the circumstances that formed him and his own brutal nature.

So with no further ado, let us commence what I'm sure will be a rousing discussion worthy of treatment that only Athenaem can render.