

***Wuthering Heights* Study Questions**

1. *Many of the names in Wuthering Heights are strikingly similar. For example, besides the two Catherines, there are a number of Lintons, Earnshaws, and Heathcliffs whose names vary only slightly. What role do specific names play in Wuthering Heights?*

Names have a thematic significance in *Wuthering Heights*. As the second generation of characters gradually exhibits certain characteristics of the first generation, names come to represent particular attributes. The Earnshaws are wild and passionate, the Lintons tame and civilized; therefore, young Catherine Linton displays a milder disposition than her mother, Catherine Earnshaw. Linton Heathcliff becomes a mixture of the worst of both his parents. In other words, he possesses Heathcliff's arrogance and imperiousness, combined with the Lintons' cowardice and frailty. Names in *Wuthering Heights* also serve to emphasize the cyclic nature of the story. Just as the novel begins and ends with a Catherine Earnshaw, the name of Hareton Earnshaw also bookends an era; the final master of Wuthering Heights shares his name with a distant ancestor, whose name was inscribed above the main door in 1500.

2. *In many ways, Wuthering Heights structures itself around matched, contrasting pairs of themes and of characters. What are some of these pairs, and what role do they play in the book?*

Matched and contrasting pairs form the apparatus through which the book's thematic conflicts play out, as the differences between opposed characters and themes force their way into action and development. Some of the pairs include: the two manor houses, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange; the two loves in Catherine's life, Heathcliff and Edgar; the two Catherines in the novel, mother and daughter; the two halves of the novel, separated by Catherine's death; the two generations of main characters, each of which occupies one half of the novel; the two families, Earnshaw and Linton, whose family trees are almost exactly symmetrical; and the two great themes of the novel, love and revenge. By placing these elements into pairs, the novel both compares and contrasts them to each other. The device of pairing serves to emphasize the book's themes, as well as to develop the characters.

3. *Analyze the character of Edgar Linton. Is he a sympathetic figure? How does he compare to Heathcliff? Is Catherine really in love with him?*

Edgar Linton is a kind, gentle, civilized, somewhat cowardly man who represents the qualities of Thrushcross Grange as opposed to the qualities of Wuthering Heights. Married to

a woman whom he loves but whose passions he cannot understand, Edgar is a highly sympathetic figure after Heathcliff returns to Wuthering Heights. The man finds himself in an almost impossible position, seeing his wife obviously in love with another man but unable to do anything to rectify the situation. Still, he proves weak and ineffectual when compared to the strong-willed Heathcliff, and thus can exercise almost no claim on Catherine's mind and heart.

While the reader may pity Edgar and feel that morality may be on his side, it is hard not to sympathize with the charismatic Catherine and Heathcliff in their passionate love. It is impossible to think that Catherine does not really love Edgar with some part of herself. Although she marries him largely because of her desire for his social status, she seems genuinely drawn to his good looks, polished manners, and kind demeanor. But it is also impossible to think that her feelings for Edgar equal her feelings for Heathcliff—compared with her wild, elemental passion for Heathcliff, her love for her husband seems frail and somewhat proper, like Edgar himself.

Suggested Essay Topics

1. Discuss the novel's narrative structure. Are the novel's narrators trustworthy? Why or why not? With particular reference to Nelly's story, consider what might be gained from reading between the lines of the narration. What roles do the personalities of the narrators play in the way that the story is told?
2. What role does social class and class ambiguity play in *Wuthering Heights*? To what extent is Heathcliff's social position responsible for the misery and conflict so persistent in the book?
3. Discuss revenge in *Wuthering Heights*. In what ways is it connected to love? What is the nature of love in the novel, that it can be so closely connected to vengeance?
4. Think about the influence of the physical landscape in the novel. What role do the moors play in the development of the story, and in the presentation of the characters? How does Catherine's abiding love of the moors help us to understand her character? What do the moors come to symbolize in the novel?

Discussion Questions:

1. To what extent do you think the setting of the novel contributes to, or informs, what takes place? Do you think the moors are a character in their own right? How do you interpret Bronte's view of nature and the landscape?

2. Discuss Emily Bronte's careful attention to a rigid timeline and the role of the novel as a sober historical document. How is this significant, particularly in light of the turbulent action within? What other contrasts within the novel strike you, and why? How are these contrasts important, and how do they play out in the novel?
3. Do you think the novel is a tale of redemption, despair, or both? Discuss the novel's meaning to you. Do you think the novel's moral content dictates one choice over the other?
4. Do you think Bronte succeeds in creating three-dimensional figures in Heathcliff and Cathy, particularly given their larger-than-life metaphysical passion? Why or why not?
5. Discuss Bronte's use of twos: *Wuthering Heights* and Thrushcross Grange; two families, each with two children; two couples (Catherine and Edgar, and Heathcliff and Isabella); two narrators; the doubling-up of names. What is Bronte's intention here? Discuss.
6. How do Mr. Lockwood and Nelly Dean influence the story as narrators? Do you think they are completely reliable observers? What does Bronte want us to believe?
7. Discuss the role of women in *Wuthering Heights*. Is their depiction typical of Bronte's time, or not? Do you think Bronte's characterizations of women mark her as a pioneer ahead of her time or not?
8. Who or what does Heathcliff represent in the novel? Is he a force of evil or a victim of it? How important is the role of class in the novel, particularly as it relates to Heathcliff and his life?

Romantic and gothic

Wuthering Heights fits into the **Romantic** period of literature. The Romantic movement flourished in the late 18th century and the first half of the 19th century and celebrated emotion, wildness and nature above reason and science. It's possible that *Wuthering Heights* was first published under a male name because the strength of passion that it depicted was thought to be unsuitable for a lady.

The name of the novel comes from the **Yorkshire** word for **withering**, meaning cold and wild. It's particularly appropriate for the setting of the novel, high up on the Yorkshire Dales in a lonely and wild place, typical of romance novels.

It is also a gothic novel because of:

- references to the supernatural (the ghosts)
- the themes of madness and death

- the extremes of passion

The gothic is often described as the dark side of Romantic fiction.

Heathcliff is a strong gothic character: his action in usurping the rightful heir to Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange is typical of a gothic plot.

Victorian morals and values

Although the the Romantic movement flourished in the **19th century**, this was also a time of strict social morals and values. The Victorian era (named after the reigning Queen Victoria) is well known for promoting straight-laced behaviour, so running wild on the moors would not have been considered acceptable. The **class system** (in which there was a strict divide between the working, middle and upper classes) was in its heyday, and the relatively new middle class were determined to maintain their status by strengthening the divisions between themselves and the working class. It was important to know your place and what you could and couldn't do - a line which Heathcliff blurs in *Wuthering Heights*.

How to plan an essay on the question of whether Heathcliff should be seen as the villain of Wuthering Heights, including a sample answer.

Question: Is Heathcliff a villain?

Preparation:

- show evidence from the text for any opinion or comment you make
- provide short quotations or precise references to the text to support your opinion or comment
- discuss those textual details, making clear their relevance to your argument
- if you wish to reach a high grade, include comments on how the book is written – style – as well as what is said
- conclude your essay strongly

For this question you may wish to refer to the following:

There are **two ways to handle this essay:**

- make a case one way or the other and argue for it very strongly throughout your essay
- present both sides - yes and no - and then weigh up at the end

In either case you need to refer to the **evidence** to back up your opinion. Even if you choose the first way, you need to show you are not ignoring the counter-evidence.

In the same way you can structure your essay either with alternating points of view, or give all the points for and all the points against (or the other way around). In this kind of question your conclusion can be quite personal, providing that you give the evidence.

For:

- the imagery associated with Heathcliff sets the scene for him to be cast as a villain
- he desires revenge: what he does to Hindley might be fair, but his treatment of Hareton is unfair
- he shows cruelty to Isabella, his wife
- his treatment of his own son is villainous
- Wuthering Heights is a dark and unhappy place under his control

Against:

- Heathcliff is also a victim
- he has an instinct to save Hareton as a child
- he is determined to be 'decent' and good, but Catherine's decision to marry Edgar tips the balance
- he loves Catherine passionately (which could be viewed sympathetically)

- he doesn't complete his vengeful destruction
- he gets his 'happy' ending - to wander the earth with Catherine (as spirits)

You will know that when writing literature essays it is important to include supporting evidence from the text in the form of **quotations**. When writing about novels, you can also give evidence that draws on the structure of the novel or events that take place, without directly quoting from the text, but you need to give enough detail to back up your point.

Sample answer - part 1

From the moment we meet Heathcliff his appearance suggests that he is a villain. Lockwood's description of Heathcliff's "black eyes" drawing up suspiciously complements Nelly's description of the "dirty, ragged black-haired child" brought home by old Mr Earnshaw. Most of Heathcliff's actions throughout *Wuthering Heights* are villainous, yet he is often considered one of the great romantic (and Romantic) heroes.

The imagery used to describe Heathcliff throughout the novel tends towards them **supernatural**, emphasising the **Gothic** style of the novel. The descriptions "goblin, vampire" and "ghoul" all crop up and their negative connotations support the case for Heathcliff being a villain. His destructive effect on the other characters in the book is foreshadowed by Mr Earnshaw's words: "You must e'en take it as a gift of God; though it's as dark almost as if it came from the devil. "This metaphor alludes to Heathcliff's mysterious origins and gives the impression of evil.

This impression is borne out by the "revenge" that Heathcliff takes on the Earnshaw family. It could be argued that his treatment of Hindley is justified by Hindley's own behaviour towards Heathcliff after Earnshaw's death: Hindley denies his adoptive brother status, education, and ultimately his chance of marrying Catherine. However, even as a child Heathcliff is not innocent, as demonstrated by the incident of Hindley's horse, which Heathcliff tries to take after his own chosen horse is injured. But it cannot be argued that Hareton, Hindley's son, deserves the punishment that Heathcliff gives him, even though it's in Hareton's debasement that Heathcliff takes most pleasure, triumphing that he "takes pride in his brutishness".

Heathcliff also treats Isabella Linton very badly once he has married her and brought her to Wuthering Heights. Heathcliff sets out very deliberately to deceive her into loving him, and then denies her friendship or any of the comforts she has grown up with. He is aware that she thinks of him as "a hero of romance", which he calls a "delusion", suggesting that **he**

regards himself in the villain's role. He seems to think that Isabella's infatuation with him is justification enough for his bad treatment. Similarly, he uses their son as an instrument of revenge, by marrying him to the younger Catherine.

In general, the atmosphere at Wuthering Heights and the unhappiness of the occupants under Heathcliff's mastership is a measure of his villainy. Brontë uses the narrative point of view of an outsider, Lockwood, to bring a fresh eye to the setting. Lockwood clearly describes the terrible situation at the Heights and its "wretched inmates" (as if it were a prison). Heathcliff has taken revenge on everyone in the book, and put himself in a position of power that creates everyone's unhappiness, including his own.

Sample answer - part 2

However, there is some evidence to suggest that **Heathcliff is not a complete villain.** He is a victim too, in a way. He becomes a favoured son and is then cast out on the death of his adoptive father, and receives very bad treatment from Hindley. This is a bitter fate, along with his beginnings as an orphan. Heathcliff's instincts are good at times: when Hindley drops Hareton from the stairs Heathcliff automatically catches the child and sets him upright, even though Nelly Dean suspects that if there had been no one there, Heathcliff would have smashed "Hareton's skull on the steps". But Nelly's opinion may be unjust, and it is, as she says, Heathcliff's "natural impulse" to save the boy.

This ties in with Heathcliff's determination at one stage in the novel to be 'decent' and 'good', as he tells Nelly Dean, suggesting that **he is not irredeemable.** It is Catherine's decision to marry Edgar Linton that means there is no motive for Heathcliff to be 'decent'. He makes this resolution when she returns from her stay at the Grange, after which her character shifts as shown by her anxiety that Heathcliff might dirty her white dress. At this point Heathcliff understands that he can no longer be with his "soul", and so he turns to revenge. He decides she has treated him "inferentially" (like the devil) and this provokes him.

The strength of Heathcliff's love for Catherine could be argued as a positive aspect of his character. Love is usually seen as a positive emotion: **to be guided by emotion is characteristic of the Romantic hero.** Heathcliff remains faithful to Catherine throughout her life, and she describes their love as an "eternal rock". However, the love that they share is not so positive because it becomes twisted and destructive of themselves and everyone around them. One could argue that Heathcliff is Catherine's victim. His marriage to Isabella is a provoked act of revenge on Catherine and the Lintons, revealing his love to be **selfish, rather than selfless.** This aspect of Heathcliff's character is complex.

Nor does Heathcliff complete his cycle of vengeful destruction: he makes sure that after his death Hareton and Catherine can be happy by leaving the family land to them. He argues that this is because Hareton and the younger Catherine remind him of his own love. He is so taken up with his perception of Catherine's spirit, that he can no longer concentrate on revenge.

Being haunted by Catherine's ghost makes him happy, and by the end of the book, he finds his version of "heaven", in which their spirits can walk the moors together. In contemporary Victorian fiction characters would be rewarded according to their morals, so a happy ending would suggest reward for an essentially positive character. But whether Brontë was following this tradition is ambiguous: *Wuthering Heights* was considered radical in its vigour and unusual plot.

Despite the mitigating circumstances of Heathcliff's life, I do not think that his actions can be forgiven. His behaviour throughout the novel brings misery and destruction to others. It may be triggered by bad treatment at the hands of Hindley, and by Catherine's cruel choices, but in the end Heathcliff is responsible for his own actions and should therefore be judged accordingly as a villain.