

Narrative Structure in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*

[BA (Hons.), Part-2, Paper-4]

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The 'structure' of a text is present in anything the author does to give a 'shape' to our experiences as we read. In *Wuthering Heights* (1847), we encounter a novel, which at first seems quite deliberately to draw attention to its own patterns of organisation. The opening word of the novel is a date '1801'; the second 'I' introduces a narrator. As the novel proceeds, we know repeatedly about how the story-telling shifts from one person to another and these shifts happen over the passage of time in and between their narratives. Therefore, the story of the central characters takes shape in a complex collage of recollection and reflection, conversation and correspondence, diary and dream.

In *Wuthering Heights*, the way the text is organised seems repeatedly to require attention first to the peripheral figures of Lookwood and Nelly, often through an accumulation of commonplace and seemingly irrelevant detail. There is the continual interruption and fragmentation of ordered chronological sequence, brought about by the multiplicity of narrators and their different methods and moments of narration. It is certainly possible to construct from the novel in retrospect a meticulously detailed calendar of events. However, we notice that this is not what we are most aware of as we are actually reading. Periods of sustained intensity alternate with sudden shifts and gaps and our sense of a steady

passage of time in the narrative is minimal: events in Nelly Dean's telling are 'shot direct' at us, rather after the fashion of Isabella's bounding, leaping flight from the Heights. What is more noteworthy is that those dates which the novel offers as 'landmarks' (1801 and 1802) turned out to be apparently arbitrary, relating only to Lockwood's preoccupation with his own comings and goings. We notice that none of the crucial events involving the central characters is presented to us directly or immediately. No sooner have we tracked through this narrative maze back to the present than the pattern eludes us again as the novel leaps several months lead to set off a further sequence of 'flash back'. Even the death of Heathcliff and the reconciliation of Catherine and Hareton, are held, as it were, at a distance, framed in the reported narratives of Nelly.

The structure of *Wuthering Heights* might appear at first almost deliberately perverse, for it balances the antithetical objects. Continually, it draws our attention to the trivial, the ordinary and the irrelevant events, as we are aware of the profound, the extra-ordinary and the compelling taking shape within it. Incidentally, the constant movement between contrasting alternative of extremely and ordinariness is a mere superficial reality leading to the inner reality of the story. There is an obvious contrast between the triviality, which triggers the dispute, and its far-reaching consequences. Unexpected as it may seem to find Heathcliff joining the tribe of the Lockwood and Nelly in his reliance on the almanack, we should note exactly what is happening. Forced, as has never before been necessary, to try to articulate the strength of his feelings for Cathy, Heathcliff can find no way of beginning except with the 'proof' he has doggedly recorded on the almanack. This persistent, absolute detail of dots and crosses, which so infuriates Cathy, represents the only way that Heathcliff can express himself with anything like the forcefulness he intends. Cathy on the other hand,

refuses to accept this literal-minded way of seeing thing: "... very foolish, as if I took notice! [...] where is the sense of that?"

Picking up again the argument over the almanack, we are able to add Cathy's words with Heathcliff's actual interpretation of her feeling for him. There is again a contrast similar to that of 'foliage' and 'rocks', but this time it is one which runs directly countered to Cathy's certainty instead of her 'eternal rocks beneath.' Heathcliff identifies her feeling with the leaves of the almanack. No sooner has Cathy insisted to Nelly that Heathcliff is always, "in my mind" than we see time already at work undermining her words. Heathcliff does not stay the few short minute longer, which would have enabled him also to hear her passionate explanation. For the next three years, Heathcliff always tries to ruminate over Cathy's mind. In turn, Heathcliff who in his demand for time with Cathy has been counting days on the almanack promptly loses three years of his life and in effect loses Cathy forever. Analysis of the almanack episode, thus, suggests that interplay of contrastive alternatives characterises the structure of *Wuthering Heights*.

In the absence of an omniscient narrator in *Wuthering Heights* we continually know that what we read is subjective, conditioned the attitudes, preconceptions, limitations or plain prejudices of narration whose only existence is within the conflicts of the text itself. As the novel unfolds, we find ourselves sympathising with the radically conflicting viewpoints of Lockwood, Heathcliff, Hindley, then Nelly, Cathy and Edgar. Other points and in different circumstances each of these same viewpoints may appear to us quite inadequate. However, at the end of novel we have learnt not to take anything for granted. The partial and mistaken judgements passed on us by the various narrators reflect what happened within the narrating itself, as characters attempt to come to term to each other and their circumstances. Lockwood, for example, speculates the marriage ability of the younger Catherine, while simultaneous

depicting to us her blind scorning of the unfortunate Hareton. Thus, the narrators relate, one after another, their encounters with lives at Heights.

The unusual narrative structure of *Wuthering Heights* with fragmented viewpoints and disputed chronology, thus, may be explained as a consequence of the 'extrimity' of what it contains. Perhaps, it would be more accurate to conclude that the true source of the novel's intensity lies in the narrative structure itself as much as in any 'episode character'. The power of *Wuthering Heights* is not, as sometimes it is implied, a marvellous mystery, explicable only in terms of the recesses of the romantic imagination. It is a power generated within the actual text through patterns of continual movement and contrast and by constant interplay of narrative, time and viewpoint in its structure.