



## Emily Brontë (1818-1848)

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Emily Brontë lived a rather secluded life with her siblings in Yorkshire.
- After publishing her only book, *Wuthering Heights* (1847), using a male pseudonym to hide her female identity, she died in 1848.
- *Wuthering Heights* is a masterpiece characterised by a complex narrative technique, multiple narrators, and universal themes such as love, death, and immortality.

Emily (Jane) Brontë was born on 30 July 1818 in Bradford, Yorkshire, the fourth of six children of an Anglican curate. After the death of her mother, when Emily was just three years old, she and her siblings were brought up by their aunt.

She studied very briefly in a school with four of her sisters but when two of them died there one year later, she returned to the family home in Haworth, Yorkshire, where she would spend most of the rest of her life.

With her brother Branwell and two sisters, Anne and Charlotte, Emily delighted in inventing and telling stories. She later spent a year studying in Brussels with her two sisters, returning to Yorkshire when her aunt died.

After an unsuccessful attempt at setting up a school with her sisters, the three of them spent their time at home, writing poems. In 1846 Charlotte included some of them in a collection called *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell*. These were **pseudonyms** used by the sisters to disguise their feminine identity, as the work of women writers was not easily published at the time. Only two copies were sold. However, two years later, Emily's only novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847) was published. Soon after the publication she died of tuberculosis on 19 December 1848, at the age of 30.

Emily was a very **reclusive, retiring person** and very little is known of her life as she appears to have had few friends and to have written few letters. She lived most of her life in her small village on the wild and desolate Yorkshire moors. She had a **deep bond with this landscape** and nature constantly stimulated her imagination.

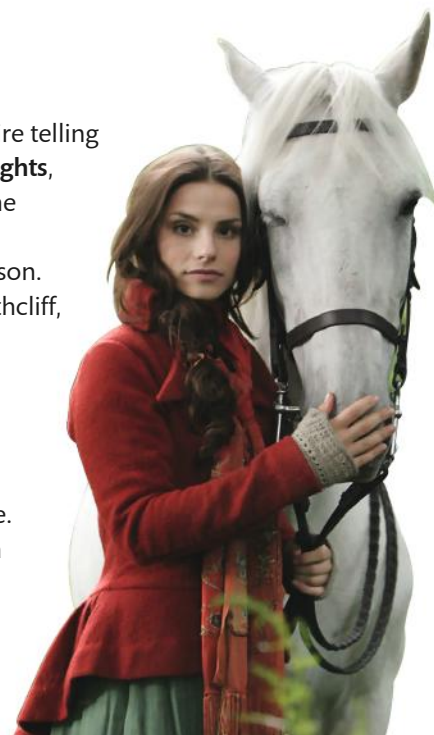
As a novelist and poet she is recognised as the most talented of the three sisters and, as a novelist, one of the finest of her century.

## Wuthering Heights (1847)

### PLOT

*Wuthering Heights* is the retrospective narration of a visitor in Yorkshire telling the story of **two households** on the Yorkshire moors: **Wuthering Heights**, the home of the Earnshaws, and **Thrushcross Grange**, the home of the Lintons. The story begins 30 years earlier, when Mr Earnshaw finds a homeless gipsy-boy on a journey to Liverpool and adopts him as his son. The boy's name is Heathcliff. Mr Earnshaw's son Hindley resents Heathcliff, but his sister Catherine grows attached to him. The arrival of the wild orphan boy has a deep impact on his adoptive family. When Mr Earnshaw dies, Hindley declares Heathcliff will no longer be allowed an education and sends him to work in the fields. Heathcliff grows up ill-treated and is bitterly angered when Catherine, whom he loves, marries the well-born and rich Edgar Linton from Thrushcross Grange. Heathcliff runs away and returns a rich man to exact revenge on both families. Even the death of his beloved Cathy cannot free Heathcliff

Actress Charlotte Riley as Catherine Earnshaw in the TV series *Wuthering Heights* (2009).



from the torments of his love-hate relationship with her and he is haunted by her ghost until the end of his life. After his death their two ghosts are said to walk together on the moor. This story combines **Romantic** and **Gothic elements** of unbridled passion, stormy natural settings, dreams and ghosts.

## AN INNOVATIVE NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

Little is known of Emily's work on *Wuthering Heights* and she may have worked long on it before its publication. The novel was not well received when it first appeared; it was considered excessively passionate, morbid, without a clear moral message and clumsy in its structure.

Nowadays, modern readers appreciate the novel's innovative narrative technique.

The novel has won praise for its **complex construction**, its interesting use of flashback, its vivid use of **idiomatic language** and its striking descriptions of the natural environment of the Yorkshire moors.

The story is told by **two narrators**, each having a distinctive narrative register and a distinctive point of view. One is Nelly, Catherine's housekeeper, who has witnessed most of the events that occurred between the two families. The other is an outsider, a visiting gentleman called Mr Lockwood, who asks Nelly to tell him the story and writes it down in his diary. These written recollections form the main body of the novel. Through the double narration, the novel achieves an effect of **impersonality** that was quite unusual at the time. This, combined with the **brilliant characterisation** and the effective use of dramatic dialogue, which gives voice to a multiplicity of characters and points of views, makes *Wuthering Heights* a great Romantic novel about love, hate and revenge, and one of the most engaging and challenging to interpret.

## THE NOVEL'S COMPLEX STRUCTURE

The novel is not based on a conventional sequence of events. It goes backwards and forwards through **flashbacks** and **personal recollections**. It begins at the end of the story, when Mr Lockwood, the new tenant of Thrushcross Grange, visits Heathcliff at Wuthering Heights, and is forced to stop for the night because of a snowstorm. During the night he is woken up by the noise made by a tree branch tapping on the window. He attempts to break the branch, but instead of the branch he finds a ghostly hand which seizes his own. A voice asks to be let in. At Lockwood's cries, Heathcliff rushes into the room. He goes to the window and begs Catherine to return. When the terrified Lockwood goes back to Thrushcross Hall the next day, Nelly, who had lived as a servant in Earnshaw's household alongside Catherine, Hindley and Heathcliff, starts telling their story.

Top Withens, a ruined farmhouse near Haworth, West Yorkshire, which is said to have been the inspiration for *Wuthering Heights*.



## LANDSCAPE AS A SYMBOL

One of the striking features of the novel is its **landscape description**, and the way the landscape and the main characters mirror each other. The landscape surrounding Wuthering Heights is characterised by moorland, which cannot be cultivated and is infertile. Heathcliff's name itself ties him to the land (heath: an area of uncultivated land; cliff: a steep rock). Thus the landscape becomes a **symbol of the protagonists' untameable nature** and passion, which cannot be restrained by rationality and as such becomes destructive and 'infertile'. Heathcliff, therefore, represents a Romantic hero while Catherine is a modern, revolutionary figure who is torn between social conventions and wilder instincts.