

# The gender question depicted in wuthering heights

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Emily Bronte, author of *Wuthering Heights*, grew up during a time of very concrete gender expectations. In the mid 1800s, English women and men understood that their genders appropriated distinct behavioral notions that they should inherit. For example, women were expected to grow and aspire to marry established men whom they would serve and take care of. Women had very little room for opinion, and would often be physically or emotionally punished if they “ misbehaved” in any way. Men were the workers; they made the money that allowed for property and food. Thus, they had automatic dominance over their spouses. Throughout the novel, Bronte presents examples of these stereotypes, but also includes characters who break the premises of the stereotypes as well. She demonstrates that behavior is not an effect of a person’s genetics; it is a direct repercussion of their environment. Bronte uses gender stereotypes from the 1800s, setting, and characterization in order to argue that gender does not define a person’s behavior or characteristics; instead, environment does.

Certain characters in the novel do not settle into the mold of their stereotypes, and these characters allow the reader to experience different behaviors from a male and a female. Of particular interest here are Catherine Earnshaw and Edgar Linton. In *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine is the dominant figure in all of her relationships. She decides whom she loves, very frequently, and she demands constant attention from those lovers. Showing divergence from her stereotype, Catherine says, ““ As soon as I learn how he feels, I’ll choose between these two — either to starve, at once, that would be no punishment unless he had a heart — or to recover and leave the country” (Bronte 121). In the mid 1800s, it was not only uncommon that a

woman had the opportunity to choose between two men, but also very rare that a woman would threaten a man. Catherine does not merely threaten Edgar; she physically assaults him: “ Edgar thoughtlessly laid hold of her hands to deliver him. In an instant one was wrung free, and the astonished young man felt it applied over his own ear in a way that could not be mistaken for a jest” (Bronte 72). Catherine is obviously not a replication of the typical English woman in the 1800s, but Edgar is not the typical male himself. He is very apprehensive when it comes to Catherine, and as Nelly observes, “ Mr. Edgar had a deep-rooted fear of ruffling her humor” (Bronte 92). Not many men in the mid 1800s would be afraid to upset their wives; the situation would normally be the contrary. Obviously, the characterization of Catherine Earnshaw and Edgar Linton aids Bronte in her argument that gender does not determine a person’s behavior.

Moreover, Bronte uses Heathcliff and Isabella Linton to give the reader examples of typical behavior of men and women in the mid 1800s. Heathcliff is a violent man who uses abuse and mind games in order to get what he wants. He has no remorse for his belligerent actions: “ He seized and thrust her from the room; and returned muttering, ‘ I have no pity! I have no pity!’” (Bronte 151). Heathcliff is obviously abusive towards Isabella, but his love for Catherine is also violent in the sense that it stirs a brutal defensiveness. ““ I meditated this plan — just to have one glimpse of your face — a stare of surprise, perhaps, and pretend pleasure; afterwards settle my score with Hindley; and then prevent the law by doing execution on myself” (Bronte 97). Heathcliff uses intensified threats in order to make Catherine feel guilty about loving another man, a tactic which resembles the actions of an

exemplary 1800s Englishman. Isabella overlooks Heathcliff's abuse, which is why she fits her stereotype as well. As Isabella is defending her love for Heathcliff to Catherine, she says, " I love him more than ever you loved Edgar; and he might love me if you would let him!" (Bronte 102). Obviously, Isabella is blindsided by the fact that Heathcliff is just using her as a punching bag so that he can release some of his anger towards the Linton family. Bronte accentuates Catherine and Edgar's originality through the characterization of Heathcliff and Isabella, but she also demonstrates the unmistakable effect that such an environment has on the behavior of particular people.

Bronte completes the nature vs. nurture argument by proving that a given character's behavior is a result of environment and not of gender. When comparing Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights, Bronte makes it clear that the auras of the houses are completely different. Lockwood describes Wuthering Heights as "' Wuthering' being a significant provincial adjective, descriptive of the atmospheric tumult" (Bronte 4). However, Thrushcross Grange leads Heathcliff to say, " We should have thought ourselves in heaven!" (48). It is obvious that Wuthering Heights is more intense, and Thrushcross Grange is more gracious, a setup which has a direct effect on the characters living in each and decides whether they follow their expected gendered behaviors or not. For example, Catherine and Heathcliff grow up in Wuthering Heights, and they develop to become assertive and potent. Although this type of maturation is normal for Heathcliff's gender, Catherine is going against the expectations of womanhood in the mid 1800s with such behavior. Edgar and Isabella mature

in the Grange, so that the pampering makes them more submissive to people such as Catherine and Heathcliff. This is ordinary behavior for Isabella due to her gender expectations, but for Edgar it is not typical. These characters prove that it is the reaction to an environment that makes people who they are.

Obviously, Emily Bronte uses gender stereotypes from the 1800s, setting, and characterization to justify that a person's nature, or genetic and hormonal makeup, does not rule out a person's behavior. The characters in the novel spent most of their time isolated in their houses, so that the atmospheres that they surrounded themselves with play a role in their conduct when they are faced with conflict. Catherine and Heathcliff grew up in a dark and sullen abode, so when they got older and faced new issues, they behaved in a demanding and violent manner. Isabella and Edgar grew up in a very traditional setting, and this setting goaded them to act in a deferential way when conflict arose. Bronte enlightened her readers to the idea that the gender assigned to a person at birth does not determine the way that such a person's life will play out through the characterization of Catherine and Edgar, the stereotypical actions from Heathcliff and Isabella, and the contrasting settings of Wuthering Heights and Trushcross Grange.