

# Castle rackrent and wuthering heights english literature essay

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



The narrator in any story is ultimately the filter through which events are told, and so a narrator holds a unique position of power. This is especially true of narrators who are involved in the events that they recount. A first person narrative tends to establish sympathy from readers; if we feel that we are getting a direct view of events, we align our judgement with that of the voice leading us through the tale. Omniscient narrators, then, can generally be seen as more objective, since they are not affected by the events they are voicing. The use of a first-person narrator is therefore a deliberate literary device designed to filter the events being told in order to generate specific reactions from readers. In Emily Brönte's *Wuthering Heights*, Ellen (Nelly) Dean narrates the bulk of the story, recounting the history of two generations of family at the Heights, which are recorded by a tenant, Lockwood, in his diary. Similarly, in Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*, which satirises Anglo-Irish landlords through the telling of the family history of several generations of Rackrents, is told by the family steward, an Irishman named Thady Quirk. The narrative positions of Nelly and Thady as long standing but subservient members of their respective households offers a unique insight into the inner workings of the two Big House families. Nelly Dean is the housekeeper at *Wuthering Heights* and has been a servant of the family her whole life, meaning she has a close alignment with the family members and the events that take place. She recounts the family history of the Earnshaws and the Lintons to Lockwood, a tenant at Thrushcross Grange, whose own story of how he came to be at the Heights frames Nelly's narrative. Incapacitated by illness, Lockwood is recuperating at the Grange and asks Nelly to entertain him with some stories. Nelly recounts the story of

the Earnshaw family who lived at the Heights thirty years prior. The family had two children, Hindley and Catherine, and later they adopt an orphaned boy, Heathcliff. Hindley becomes desperately jealous of Heathcliff, while Catherine becomes very attached to him, and the two quickly become inseparable. Hindley, who is older than Catherine, is sent away to college, where he meets and marries a woman named Frances. Three years later, Mr Earnshaw dies and Hindley returns to Wuthering Heights as the new master. Hindley forces Heathcliff to become a servant to the family. The tale focuses on the passionate but doomed love of Catherine and Heathcliff, and the destruction that their infatuation has on them and the people around them. The diegetic narrative of Wuthering Heights offers readers a complex insight into the lives of its tenants. Though the main narrative is Nelly's, it is her recollections as recorded by Lockwood in his diary that we read. This narrative is then framed by Lockwood's own thoughts. This narrative technique thus posits questions around the authenticity and authority of the narrative voice. Since the majority of the novel is narrated by the subservient Nelly Dean, her position in the events as they occur and then in the narrative as she retells the story have a significant impact on the tale. Nelly's seemingly innocuous position as a servant affords her the ability to manipulate events and she has far more agency than it appears on first glance. Nelly's motivations and her presence in the events thus require close examination in order to establish her trustworthiness. From the outset, Nelly's position within the Earnshaw household is firmly established. Through her comment to Lockwood that her mother "nursed Mr Hindley" (24), it becomes obvious that Nelly has been part of the household since infancy. In

this regard, she is more than a mere servant. She is a close observer and active agent in the development of the lives of the Earnshaw children. Gideon Shunami suggests that this gives Nelly " a feeling of imagined equality" with the family, " with all of the responsibilities and privileges which that entails" (454). According to Turner, this kind of connection to the family reflects the expectations of the " feudal servant" (7), who seek a place of emotional alliance with their masters in addition to the basic provision of a job and a place to live. Nelly has no children of her own, and despite her closeness in age to the Earnshaw children, she adopts a position of authority over them. With no family of her own, Nelly is reliant on the Earnshaws for emotional and practical fulfilment. Her position in the household, then, is extremely important to her, for without it, she has nothing. Nelly's dual identity as a pseudo-family member and servant becomes apparent as a source of tension in the novel, as it becomes increasingly clear that she is not merely reporting on events but has been involved in manipulating them to her own advantage. Nelly's close allegiance to Hindley Earnshaw from childhood suggests that whilst Catherine and Heathcliff were growing closer, Nelly and Hindley also had a special relationship. Indeed, they are shown to have a " favourite spot" on the moors (78), reflecting the amount of time that they must have spent together as children before Nelly became the servant proper. Nelly protects Hindley, despite his violent jealousy towards Heathcliff, encouraging Heathcliff to blame his bruises from Hindley's latest beating on the horses (28). Even after Hindley's departure to college and subsequent marriage to Frances, Nelly's loyalty to him remains steadfast, as she recounts how she felt it was her " duty" to inform him that locals were

speaking badly of his gambling and drunken ways after Frances's death (78). This loyalty is emphasised by Nelly's reaction to Hindley's death, in which she weeps "as for a blood relation, desiring Kenneth to get another servant to introduce him to the master" (135). Not only does Nelly react to the loss of Hindley with a familiarity that suggests the depth of their feelings for one another, but she also steps outside her position as the servant, expecting others to fulfil her duties whilst she mourns her loss. Additionally, Nelly comments to Lockwood that "our Miss Cathy is of us - I mean, of the Lintons" (24, emphasis added). Thus, from the outset, it is clear that Nelly thinks of herself as far more than a servant to the Earnshaw family. Nelly's close relationship to Hindley is further highlighted through her dislike of his sister, Catherine. Nelly proclaims on more than one occasion that she does not love Catherine, and mentions that she "rather relished mortifying [Catherine's] vanity" (50), demonstrating her harsh feelings towards Catherine that are likely borne out of jealousy. Clearly, however, Nelly keeps her hostility hidden, as Catherine confides in Nelly that she is torn between Edgar and Heathcliff, and that she is unable to marry the latter because of his lack of social status and education. During this exchange, Nelly is aware that Heathcliff is nearby, listening unseen to the conversation. Hearing Catherine's summation of him as uneducated, Heathcliff flees before he hears the rest of the conversation in which Catherine admits to Nelly that she is only marrying Edgar so that can raise Heathcliff's social standing. Nelly purposely waits for Catherine to finish speaking before informing her that Heathcliff had overheard the conversation, by which time it is too late for Catherine to follow Heathcliff. Thus, Nelly is instrumental in Heathcliff's

demise and, ultimately, in the failed unity of the doomed lovers. In so doing, Nelly rids the Heights of a person she does not like, and the marriage of Catherine and Edgar secures Nelly's position at the Heights and provides her with emotional and economic security that would not be guaranteed if Heathcliff were elevated from his social position. As Turner notes, "if Nelly [had] been able to overcome her distaste for Catherine...two decades of pain and misery could have been averted" (39). The role of Nelly in Heathcliff's downfall also represents the significance of the role of seeing and listening in the novel. As a servant, Nelly can present herself as peripheral to the events she describes, often sneaking unseen around the house to listen in on others' conversations, poking around in private drawers and generally acting as a meddling and nosey woman. Heathcliff, notably, is the only character who consistently recognises Nelly's underhandedness: "I was not aware there were eaves-droppers...Worthy Mrs Dean, I like you, but I don't like your double dealing" (170). Thus, Heathcliff demonstrates awareness of Nelly's dual role in the lives of the tenants; she acts the loyal servant, but is far more instrumental in shaping the events that the others realise. Her subservient position allows her to go largely unnoticed in the house, affording her the time and space to meddle in the affairs of her masters to meet her own needs. It is only when it is too late for the situation to be resolved that Catherine becomes aware of Nelly's treacherousness. Upon Catherine falling ill, Nelly arranges secret visits for Heathcliff but suggests to Edgar that Catherine is "sadly put out by Mr Heathcliff's behaviour," advising Edgar that "there's harm in being too soft" (82) in allowing Heathcliff to see Catherine. Again, her meddling contributes directly to the

downfall of the principal characters, and her unabashed manipulating contributes to the critical moment of the plot in which Catherine dies. As Turner suggests, "...in making [Heathcliff and Edgar] into enemies, Nelly becomes imperative to both of their relationships with Catherine" (42). By encouraging Edgar to retaliate against his old rival, Nelly succeeds in creating circumstances in which Catherine suffers. Too late, Catherine becomes aware of Nelly's true feelings and her role in Catherine's destruction, proclaiming Nelly as a " traitor...my hidden enemy. You witch!" (93). Again, Nelly's jealousy of Catherine drives the plot, as Nelly uses her position as go-between to cement her role in the house, securing her own future. Comparing Nelly to Shakespeare's Iago, Hafley notes that " It is a richly symbolic moment when, after Cathy's death, Nelly twists the lock of Heathcliff's hair with that of Edgar's and encloses them in the locket, herself the agent of their tragedy" (209). With Catherine gone and a baby to provide for, Nelly is needed by Edgar more than ever. The arrival of Catherine's child, Cathy, provides Nelly with another generation of the family to serve, securing the family's reliance on her for years to come. As the narrative progresses and Cathy grows up, Nelly's animosity towards Catherine is shown to extend to Cathy. Pleading with Nelly to keep a secret, Cathy begs her not to tell, as to do so would be " very heartless" (185). Nelly asserts her authority over Cathy, despite being a servant, telling the child that " I'll make up my mind on the point by tomorrow, Miss Catherine" before immediately revealing the child's secret, " with the exception of her conversations with her cousin, and any mention of Hareton" (185). It is clear that Nelly both adapts the stories she tells at the time as well as the story she now tells

Lockwood, emphasising her dual role in the narrative and her duplicitous nature. Nelly's future with the family would be most secure through a marriage between Catherine and Hareton, since Heathcliff is aware of Nelly's "double dealing" and thus a marriage between Linton and Catherine would render Nelly vulnerable to being excused of her duties. Linton is also a weak child, and therefore unlikely to survive to adulthood to provide a future generation of the family for Nelly to be needed by (Turner 44). Nelly disregards the wishes of her charge, focusing instead on her own needs for future security. Thus, Nelly does everything in her power - a power that is underestimated by her masters because of her lowly social position - to shape the events that she innocently recounts to Lockwood. Nelly's vindictive scheming continues even after Heathcliff's death, whereby she conceals "the fact of his having swallowed nothing for four days, fearing it might lead to trouble" (244), but the only trouble she is concerned with is her own. Trying to arrange Heathcliff's corpse, Nelly's attempts to close his open eyes prove futile as the face of the dead Heathcliff appears to Nelly to be "sneering" (243) at her. In this final act of retaliation, Heathcliff "faces Ellen with the innocence that is his knowledge of her guilt, and it is too much even for her" (Hafley 214). Thus, it is "only in death that Heathcliff has been able to resist, to escape, that "meddling" ... But [Nelly] has won, nonetheless; she finishes, "I shall be glad when they leave [the Heights], and shift to the Grange!" (Hafley 214). Nelly also emphasises her perceived position as an authoritative member of the household when she tells Lockwood that she and Edgar agreed that Catherine should stay at the Grange and that Nelly "should remain as housekeeper... [I] began to cheer up under the prospect of



retaining my home, and my employment, and above all, my beloved young mistress" (207). The relegation here of Catherine to the last part of Nelly's sentence demonstrates her priorities - she is clearly looking out only for herself. As Turner demonstrates, Nelly's direct role in raising the young Cathy imprints Cathy's personality, since Nelly raises the child to be "easily manipulated" (46). In influencing Cathy's decisions and the course of her life, Nelly positions herself as the matriarch of the family, making herself seem indispensable (Turner 47). Her life-long affinity to the family is demonstrated as a clever ruse rather than servant loyalty. The same can be said of Castle Rackrent's servant-narrator, Thady Quirk. Castle Rackrent is narrated from the perspective of Thady Quirk, a steward of the Rackrent family for many generations. Like *Wuthering Heights*, the novel has a dual narrative in that Thady's tale is framed by an editorial introduction, epilogue and glossary that are written from an omniscient perspective. As Glover notes, this splitting can be found elsewhere in the novel, including in "a divided title, a divided subtitle, a divided editorial frame, a divided central narrative, two narrators, two families each with two names (O'Shaughlin-Rackrent and M'Quirk-Quirk), two national voices, two religions, and two narrative time frames" (31). The editorial addendums are aimed at the "ignorant English reader" (37) who may be unaccustomed to the robust Irish vernacular that Thady uses. Thus, the novel actually presents two points of view: English and Irish, with the English perspective appearing to be the superior of the two. Since *Castle Rackrent* was written just prior to the Act of Union that established Ireland as part of the United Kingdom, the inclusion of the English narrative voice in the novel provides a unique insight into Irish

society at a time when Ireland was under English colonial rule, echoing the traditional relationship between disempowered servants and their ruling masters. Additionally, as Brookes contends, in Thady Edgeworth creates a narrator with believable " qualities of regional speech and ignorance, but she can manipulate his voice to serve her purpose. In fact, the manipulation of his voice is one of the clues, necessary to her form, that we are reading fiction and not history" (602). History, however, is something that Edgeworth takes pains to highlight in the novel, asserting repeatedly that the events are those of the past, before 1782. Through the editorial voice, she reasons with readers to remember that these are " tales of other times" (3); that the stories belong to a race now extinct in Ireland: There is a time when individuals can bear to be rallied for their past follies and absurdities, after they have acquired new habits and a new consciousness. Nations as well as individuals gradually lose attachment to their identity, and the present generation is amused rather than offended by the ridicule that is thrown upon their ancestors. (3-4) Thus, in her framing narrative, Edgeworth reaffirms her conflicted position as an Anglo-Irish woman living in a nation on the cusp of change. The relegation of the stories to the past also confirms Thady's authority to tell them, since there are no members of the Rackrent family around to cast doubt over Thady's version of events. Like Nelly Dean in Wuthering Heights, the reader only has Thady's point of view to rely on. Edgeworth asserts Thady's authority early on, establishing him as someone who does not " simply pour forth anecdotes and retell conversations with all the minute prolixity of a gossip in a country town" (3). Furthermore, the omniscient editor who frames Thady's narrative appears to reinforce Thady's

authenticity, asserting in the preface that " those who were acquainted with the manners of a certain class of the gentry of Ireland some years ago, will want no evidence of the truth of honest Thady's narrative" (3). With his authority clearly advocated, Thady takes over the narrative to tell the episodic stories of four generations of Rackrent heirs, depicting the character flaws and ultimate downfall of each whilst concealing the depth of his own involvement in the final demise of the last Rackrent heir, Sir Condy, who is forced to sell Castle Rackrent to none other than Thady's " own son, Jason" (63). From the outset, Thady is suggested as needing encouragement to tell his tale, though he eventually volunteers his narrative. In this, Edgeworth emphasises Thady's suggested innocence, portraying him as a mere servant who has to be persuaded to tell his story. Later in the narrative, however, it becomes clear that Thady is a skilled narrator who has " learned the masters' language" (Tracy 24), which allows him to present his story as " the account of a loyal servant ... [and] the account of a servant who is actually master" (Tracy 11). In his dual role, he echoes the position of Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights* as controlling the events that they later describe. Unlike Nelly, however, who is reliant on the family for her economic security, Thady has his own family and therefore occupies a unique dual position as a patriarch and a servant. Thady is clearly proud of his son, Jason, who is studying law. It is Thady's alleged allegiance to the Rackrent family, though, that is the true focus of the novel. Similarly to Nelly Dean, Thady comes from a line of generations who have served the same family. His role in the Rackrent home is presented as one of familial loyalty, but his constant references to Jason undermine this, suggesting his true allegiance to his

blood relatives. He is reliant on the Rackrents for security, and so his relationships with the successive line of heirs are crucial in understanding his position as an untrustworthy narrator. According to Cochran, Thady's position in the social hierarchy of the Rackrent home places him in the role of a "slave narrator" (57), a position that generates sympathy from the reader for the oppressed servant. Cochran likens Thady's tale to a slave narrative through its "its presentation of a conflicted slave narrator, its use of the framing device of the outside editor, and its narrative structure of episodic anecdotes that utilizes memory, description, and didacticism" (57), which are the main elements of a slave narrative. Several signifiers, however, undermine "honest Thady's" (3) self-portrayal and expose his actions as those of a clever subservient person patiently awaiting his opportunity to rise up against those that oppress him. Central to his ability to do this is Thady's mask of unwavering loyalty to the four Rackrent men who successively inherit the estate. Following the death of Thady's first master, Sir Patrick O'Shaughlin, through excess drinking, the Rackrent estate is passed down to Sir Murtagh, who is obsessed with trying to obtain money by winning shady lawsuits. Thady comments on Sir Murtagh's record of winning law suits: "Out of forty nine suits which he had, he had never lost one but seventeen..." (11). On first glance, this statement appears to be supportive of Sir Murtagh, but in fact, he wins only slightly more than half of the cases. In a performance of loyalty, Thady wittingly highlights Sir Murtagh's flaws. Tracy argues that the reader is at first taken in by Thady's apparent admiration of his masters, but that "we begin to realise that Thady is the gainer from the foolish behaviour he records and praises. As manipulative

servant he controls his masters, as narrator he controls the narrative" (11). All of the Rackrent heirs described in Thady's tale are subject to the same subtle exposure of their flaws. In appearing to "honour the legacy of the Rackrents while exposing all of their baser qualities...Thady returns to the conflicted position of slave narrator" (Cochran 70). Sir Murtagh's presence in the narrative also affords one of the first glimpses into Thady's misogynistic thoughts on women, adding a gendered layer to the narrative. Sir Murtagh's wife is a tight-fisted woman, sardonically from the Skinflint family in Ireland. Sir Murtagh marries her for her wealth, which she refuses to share with him. Indeed, Lady Murtagh's miserly ways are unpopular with the tenants of the estate, as she exploits them by extorting food and other goods. An argument with his wife over money leads to Sir Murtagh's death, and Lady Murtagh is bestowed with generous wealth. She leaves the estate, taking with her "all the featherbeds...blankets and household linen, down to the very knife cloths" (13). Thus, the portrayal of women in the novel through the chauvinistic eyes of Thady allows Edgeworth to explore gender issues in relation to class. Furthermore, Thady's comments on Lady Murtagh's nationality also suggest race tensions in the novel that echoes the tension between Ireland and England at the time the novel is set. Thady comments of Lady Murtagh that he "always suspected she had Scotch blood in her veins; anything else I could have looked over in her from a regard to the family" (9). Thady, then, is shown to judge his masters harshly, but conceals his true feelings in the knowledge that maintaining an allegiance to the Rackrent men will secure his economic future. Sir Murtagh is succeeded by his younger brother, Sir Kit, who is just as wasteful with money and quickly

becomes impoverished. To escape this situation, Sir Kit marries a Jewish heiress from England who arrives "a stranger in a foreign country" (17), met with barely disguised hostile bigotry. Thady mocks the new Lady Rackrent's ignorance of the ways of Irish life and refers to her as a "heretic blackamoor" (18). Sir Kit, however, does not display the same racist tendencies, perhaps suggesting on Edgeworth's part a view that racism is typical of the lower classes. Sir Kit is, however, infuriated by his new wife's refusal to give him her diamond necklace. Sir Kit's response is to refuse to serve kosher food, at which point his wife "shut herself up in her own room" (20), where she is locked in by Sir Kit and kept captive for seven years. During this time, Sir Kit lives a bachelor lifestyle and searches for a new, rich wife. A duel over a woman results in Sir Kit's death, and his captive wife is freed by Jason, and leaves Ireland with her diamonds intact. Again, despite racist and misogynist attacks by Thady on their characters, the Rackrent wives are victorious over the ineffectual Rackrent men to whom Thady aligns his loyalty. Sir Kit is succeeded by Sir Condy, who is "ever [Thady's] great favourite" (25). Indeed, Thady reveals his influence over Sir Condy from the latter's childhood, informing the reader that Sir Condy "loved to sit on my knee whilst I told him stories of the family and the blood from which he was sprung, and how he might look forward, if the then present man should die without childer, to being at the head of the Castle Rackrent estate" (27). Here, Thady exposes the history of his role within the Rackrent family and the agency of that role; he shapes the young Sir Condy's desires and reiterates the significance of the "blood" from which a man is born. Significantly, though, it is his own blood line that Thady is most defensive of,

and his covert manipulations into Rackrent affairs result in the ultimate demise of the Rackrent family and the rising of the Quirks. As Tracy notes, "due to Thady's power over the narration of the Rackrent history, he has entered fully into the Rackrents' myth about themselves even as he cynically manipulates that myth" (21). The interplay between class and gender is highlighted again in the 'love triangle' between Sir Condy, Thady's niece Judy, and an heiress, Isabella Moneygawls, who Sir Kit eventually marries. Isabella, an educated girl with aspirations of being an actress, quotes Shakespeare at Thady which Thady takes as a sign of her madness, again emphasising Thady's inability to fit in with those of higher social standing. Isabella and Condy quickly spend her fortune on a lavish lifestyle before borrowing money to finance the existence to which they have become accustomed. Once the money runs out, Isabella becomes disenchanted with life at Castle Rackrent and she leaves to return to her father's home but is almost killed in an accident en route (it later transpires that Isabella was disfigured by the accident, suggesting her fall from grace to the poorer class). The scene in which Isabella tells Sir Condy that she is leaving involves Thady listening to their conversation from the hallway outside, mirroring Nelly Dean's covert eavesdropping on the protagonists as a way of garnering information that will be useful later: "With that she heaved a great sigh, that I heard plain enough in the passage" (Edgeworth 46). This statement exemplifies the underhand manner in which the servants of Wuthering Heights and Castle Rackrent move about their respective worlds, harbouring secrets and selectively disclosing information that ultimately results in their own elevation in social status. In creating roles for themselves as confidants,

and as "faithful," "honest" servants, Nelly and Thady expertly manage the affairs of those around them, later recounting the stories of the families with feigned innocence. Castle Rackrent draws to a close with Sir Condry being forced to sell the estate to Thady's son, Jason, and the death of Sir Condry with Thady by his side, offering him drinks despite Sir Condry's obvious alcoholism. Again, Thady acts duplicitously, effectively hastening the death of the master he professed as his favourite. Thady comments in the final section of his narrative that he is "tired wishing for anything in this world... but I'll say nothing...as for all I have here set down from memory and hearsay of the family, there's nothing but truth in it from beginning to end, that you may depend upon, for where's the use of telling lies about the things which everybody knows as well as I do?" (66). Thady's refusal to say anything juxtaposed with his assertion that he has told nothing but truth posits questions around the authenticity of memory and the credence of Thady as a narrator. The assumption, too, that "everyone knows as well" as Thady the events that transpired in the downfall of the Rackrent family exposes the fallacy of his authority, since readers only have Thady's view of the events. By the time of Sir Condry's death, Thady would be at least ninety years old, and is thus the only living member of the Rackrent household to have lived through the events he relates. In this way, he holds a similar position to Nelly Dean, who lives through the deaths of three main characters and recounts their story in a way that represents her as an innocent bystander. The closure of Castle Rackrent involves a final narrative intrusion by the editor, who asserts that s/he "could have readily made the catastrophe of Sir Condry's history more dramatic and more pathetic, if he



thought it allowable to varnish the plain round tale of faithful Thady" (67). The reiteration here of "faithful" to describe Thady serves to question his reliability rather than reinforce it. The setting of the narrative in the years before the Union also allows the Editor to question "whether a Union will hasten or retard the amelioration of [Ireland]...Did the Warwickshire militia, who were chiefly artisans, teach the Irish to drink beer, or did they learn from the Irish to drink whiskey?" (67). The final question in the novel thus brings the issue of English colonisation back to the fore, but poses the suggestion that the two nations can learn from each other, and that the Union need not be as doomed as the marital unions of the feckless Rackrent heirs. The role of the servant narrator provides Nelly Dean and Thady Quirk with the scope to select what the reader is told, giving them the power to direct the narrative and portray the events however they wish. By presenting themselves as innocents within their respective stories, they occupy a unique position of power not usually associated with the lower classes in Big House novels. Each narrator includes biographical details about themselves that suggest that they are, in fact, the "center and shaper" of their stories (Cochran 62). Thus, while their positioning in the narratives as the central voices at first seem to demonstrate their reliability, the narrative framing of Lockwood and the editor serve to suggest otherwise. Additionally, the servants reveal through their language and their behavior towards their masters that they are not passive bystanders but rather, active agents in the events that they describe. As Turner asserts: Thady Quirk and Ellen Dean are servant-narrators who strategically use feigned allegiance, astute perception, and selective disclosure to wield power over the lives of their

masters... In addition, [their] proficiency at [manipulating] gives [them] the ability to effectively be ... [their] masters' masters. (2, 33). Ultimately, each uses their social status and invisibility within the events to manipulate the lives of those they serve, consequently raising their own social status and securing their economic futures in a society on the cusp of significant change. Word count: 4989