Unreliable narration of wuthering heights

Literature, British Literature

Emily Bronte’s literary dexterity heightens both the inhumanity and passion of her lurid tale, in that she does not tell it herself. Rather, it is the act of storytelling from the words of Lockwood and Nelly that serves as the basis of the intricate discourse of Wuthering Heights. That every phrase of the novel is in the words of a character ensures that Bronte places readers into a state of prolepsis, yet readers are constantly kept in suspense through the fact of the narrators’ unreliability. Nonetheless, along with the numerous perspectives of other characters, in the form of diaries or letters, Bronte utilises such as narrative structure as a vehicle through which she creates an exigency of her characters’ pasts. The plot, divided into two parts – the second, superimposed upon the first – creates a sense of claustrophobia within the novel; thus, like Lockwood himself, the reader is left in a cluster of confusion, shock, and mystery, but most significantly reads on with an eagerness for the narrative to unfold.

The reader does not initially find himself or herself drawn to the alluringly dangerous world of the novel, as it is presented through the foolish eyes of Lockwood. There is an explicit criticism of the class system that permeates eighteenth century England, in that, despite being the most educated character of the novel, Lockwood proves himself the poorest judge of character. The reader is called to question his reliability from page one, as he paradoxically deems Heathcliff a “ capital fellow,” despite writing that he speaks through “ closed teeth” – Bronte’s obvious allusion to the violence that simmers beneath Heathcliff’s gentlemanly “ dress and manners”. His failure to distinguish cats from dead rabbits, display an understanding of the weather, or even decipher between the relations of those at Wuthering

Heights, reinforces his injudicious nature – all of which incidents fail to arouse any eagerness within the reader. Yet Lockwood's encounter with the supernatural is central to altering this impression. As the ghost of young Cathy pleads entrance into her childhood sanctuary, she evokes from him – perhaps one of the most innocuous characters of the entire novel – acts of the most unforgiving brutality, as he " rubbed" her hand against shattered glass " till the blood ran down and soaked the bed clothes." That he never writes of awakening from his " slumber" challenges the assertion of him merely dreaming; rather, it reinforces the realism of the paranormal within the novel. This episode incites a sense of excitement within the reader.

Nelly, on the other hand, is the postmodern storyteller whom Bronte utilises to not merely cast moral judgements on her characters, but also to drive the narrative forward. She prefaces her narration to Lockwood and the reader by calling it a " story," one that she could tell in " half a dozen words." Through such phrases, Bronte reminds readers that the story within her ' story' is also a construct; based upon Nelly's own personal biases and prejudices, through which the reader is invited to form unique perceptions of the narrative. Perhaps this is because, despite being the storyteller, Nelly is as present within the tale as any other character, and, contrary to her own beliefs, is responsible for much of the tragedy that occurs in the novel. She fails to notify Edgar of his wife's deteriorating health or starvation, and betrays her mistress' trust in disclosing to Edgar news of Heathcliff's regular visits at Thrushcross Grange to " poison the mistress against" him. Cathy's cry, " Nelly has played traitor," reverberates throughout the second volume as well. Nelly knows of Isabella's elopement with Heathcliff, but does not tell

Edgar until it is too late, and further, she encourages the affair between Catherine Linton and her cousin, Linton Heathcliff, through arranging secret meetings with them, despite Edgar's wishes. Such occurrences epitomise Nelly's betrayal of trust, and force readers to discredit her earlier observations of Cathy as egocentric, and Heathcliff as merely " cruel and vindictive." This scepticism is invoked further as Lockwood describes her as a " fair narrator," as Lockwood's own reliability is also questionable. Consequently, the reader is empowered in the ability to look beyond Nelly's narration to form distinct views of the characters in the novel.

Yet within the narratives of Lockwood and Nelly are the interwoven viewpoints of letters, diaries, and recounting from memory, of other characters, which all serve to create an urgency of a past that seems to grow closer as the novel progresses. Cathy's diary provides readers with only glimpses of the violent cruelty and unrestrained passion that they are to learn of later within Nelly's narration, and yet this document is enough to awaken curiosity within them. Not only so, but it also heightens the ambiguity that permeates Bronte's novel, in that Lockwood has just met Cathy's daughter, who holds the same name as his mother. Names, therefore, are rigidly symbolic, and the repetition of them create direct parallels between the characters of the first and second generation. Catherine with Cathy, Hareton with Heathcliff, Linton with Edgar; such doubles allow for the curtailed narratives of the first generation to continue within the second, and for the novel to reach emotional completion. Hence, Catherine teaches Hareton how to read, and provides him with the education that Heathcliff was denied as a child. Bronte, as a result, reveals the way

their love is one of mutuality and compatibility, where both of their natures complement each other rather than undermine – in opposition to the first generation. Thus, the two narratives that overlap each other serve to provide readers with the history of the second generation before the narrative reaches completion. This allows which for the reader to anticipate the romance of Catherine and Hareton, which dispels the transgressions of the former world.

In essence, the unreliability of the two primary narrators deters a reader’s trust, and thus forces the reader to cast his or her own judgements upon the characters of the novel. This arrangement prevents the act of storytelling from becoming passive. Rather, the reader feels empowered in the ability to determine the true nature of not only the characters but also the storytellers, Nelly and Lockwood. The premise, with its two parts that unfold contemporaneously, allows for the reader to form an understanding of characters before they emerge, and thoroughly engages Bronte’s audience within the reading process.