

Wuthering heights as part of literary canon

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



Incest, violence, gambling, and the North of England – just several topics central to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* that were abhorrent to the polite Victorian elites who originally devised the principle of 'Canon'. The Literary Canon of the West was conceived as a gathering of texts deemed 'worthy of study' by the establishment, as a result of what were defined as 'universal themes' and 'aesthetic' qualities. It is uncommon for texts to enter the canon, especially texts which deviate from this set of 'qualities' deemed fixed, while remaining coated in ambiguity. The canon is intended for classifying distinct and timeless literature due to the aforementioned qualities, yet the selected works still exude a complexity which can be viewed as 'unified' with those of other canonical works. For this reason, the canon appears to be a contradictory, arbitrary category for which varying contexts of reception and production ultimately make the merit and meaning of each entirely subject to the individual, and should not be categorised according to the 'ruling ideology'.

Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights is within the number of works often considered canonical, due to its transcendence among certain readers, which defies the expectation of such a text to be 'non-offensive'. This was a sentiment shared by Charlotte Brontë, who wrote that she did not view it 'right or advisable to create beings like Heathcliff', the cruel, Byronic anti-hero whose divisive behaviours reveal why *Wuthering Heights* epitomises the contradictions of the Canon itself. Often, what many despise in *Wuthering Heights* is that which others deem valuable.

Let us investigate, however, the youngest Brontë novelist's famously cataclysmic (and therefore accessible) creation, in relation to the canon. In

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Wuthering Heights, Brontë approaches the plight of women contemporary to her, in a rawer fashion than most other related canonical works. This overt politicisation is in part a comment on the eternal clashes of nature, like those so often pondered on amongst the greats of the Canon, but proved itself to be far too engaged with the reality of emerging feminism to merit the text any establishment recognition for many years to come. Brontë shapes the story around the brutality of 'senseless, wicked' Cathy, who still manages to place Linton, and Heathcliff under her spell-, a thoroughly unconventional female for the time. It could be argued that Brontë utilises the suppression of her time in only a natural way, and that elements of her novel are subsequently perceived as the 'universal themes' of generic canonical texts, to the ruling classes in society.

Cathy's (in)famous declaration "I am Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure" is not in fact the opening to the Romantic manifesto. This is Brontë's synopsis of her character's complex co-dependency with her adoptive sibling that is a means of foreshadowing the dual doom of the characters, the ruin of which would never be revered as possessing objectively great aesthetic qualities. The shocking example immediately set by the Brontë's dysfunctional creatures alienates the majority of the potential audience, who mirrored the 'pious, old' finger-pointing mind-set of Victorian Joseph, or the 'gossiping neighbours' who feel violated by the Earnshaw family's activities.

The idea that pieces of art can embody universal values to all mankind is a dangerous myth. The minds that hold this view should at least acknowledge that Brontë's 'Wuthering Heights' rarely does. The novel will never be

pleasing to the masses; its savage characters a construct of contradictory humans whose examples should not be encouraged to transcend social groups. Although, Brontë's characters appeal is that they are imperfect, and therefore cannot be part of a canon which claims to be the gatekeeper of universally divine values.

The typical language of the canon often revels in complexity and ambiguity. The writer is a craftsman whose control is appreciated by critics. In 'Wuthering Heights' Brontë is purposely inelegant and uncontrolled—" Oh, damnation! I will have it back; and I'll have his gold too; and then his blood." Images are mundane yet dramatic, conjuring images of " hell" and " blood" that shape the novel as uncouth and gory in the minds of its critics, and ' readerly' against its fans- unlike the typical tropes of the canon. Brontë structures the novel's narrative in a deliberately repetitive way. Impacting words and phrases are repeated throughout the novel, and the plot, narrators, & characters are arguably contain ' doubles', with the exception being the hopeful ending for Catherine and Hareton, once Brontë has retired the vicious cycle to the dead. This makes the novel accessible in a way many canon texts are not, for it mirrors the far from aesthetic social downfalls of the readers' reality. Brontë's language throughout the novel's parallel arcs is diverse, vivid, and therefore enchanting. The upper-class opening prose of Lockwood, compared to Joseph's regional code, to Cathy's poetic pleads are ultimately too indulgent and varied to embody universal prestige.

Consider the techniques of Tolstoy, a writer whose works undoubtedly and repeatedly fall into the realm of the canon. His masterpiece Anna Karenina is

the ultimate transcendent fantasy fulfilment, with the pursuit of a forbidden affair ultimately leading to tragedy, and its jibes at the hypocrisy and thus humanity of those in high society. Although scandalous, Tolstoy's undeniable skill is in creating a novel that strikes at the heart of human emotion and rebellious yearning, revealing the immorality of the upper classes while assuming that such downfalls are true of us all. Although the politics of 'Wuthering Heights' is open to many similar interpretations, its vulgarity and focus on the powerless, forbids them to be equated with the non-offensive or 'universal' themes canonical texts like Tolstoy's are more regularly associated with.

'Wuthering Heights' is still more than worthy reading material however. The novel is valuable in the shock it generates, by portraying brutal divides of class, gender, and ethnicity in its characters. The novel has no objectively artistic value in presenting aspirational situations, if the novel was released in a society of equality, liberty, and fraternity, its musings could be dismissed as over dramatic images of bizarre personal circumstances. The worth of the novel is inseparable from the culture viewing it, and the fortunes of the readers, not to any concrete sanctity of the work of the writer, and the claim that any art may attain 'eternal charm' is tied to the subjective concept of 'Canon' itself which can be increasingly dismissed on the basis of the relativism of artistic merit. Eagleton and others have attributed this flaw in each 'Canon', as derived from its construction by the ruling elite, in an attempt to culturally oppress the lower orders.

One of the most worthy aspects of the novel is largely its utility rather than its aesthetic attributes. Brontë revolves the novel around the repercussions of the Mr. Earnshaw's charity in adopting Heathcliff, the 'dark-skinned gipsy', in which she seeks to publicise the catastrophes faced by those stigmatised in Victorian society due to physical features they have no power over. This would be untypical of the Canon, which intends to endorse 'art for art's sake', thus avoiding the addition of more politicised and controversial texts. Although Eagleton would suggest that this aim is superfluous in and of itself, as all texts are political - albeit unconsciously. Linton's determination "to be as grievous and harassing as he can" positions the reader to ponder on the struggle of both mental and physical illness, while additionally highlighting the taboo of his feminine upbringing in a Victorian society; fuelled by Brontë's companionship with death from the passing of her mother in childhood, a common trope of the reality and fiction of her era. With Linton's "perverseness of an indulged plague of a child" irking both character and reader, providing an example of childish ignorance which contributed to Catherine's entrapment by Heathcliff and forced marriage to him. The marriage is a device used by Brontë as an example of the unpalatable repression of female autonomy, and how the aesthetics of female sexuality may be appropriated as a commodity to please the male society, partially embodied by the Canon.

Literary value is generally a concept subject to the contexts of reception. Wuthering Heights is a cautionary tale, yet one infused with primitive intensities by Bronte, and may be enjoyed as fantasy among the elites of societies, that may be utilised as a demonstration of the less 'universally

pleasing' elements of human nature. In an imperfect world, it is illogical to revere the Canon for representing literary ' greatness', while its very assumption is that it has no practical value. In a utopia, the gender and class conflicts portrayed by Tolstoy and Brontë would be regarded as void of utility, while at present Wuthering Heights provides an outlet for banal desires, with has the intention of providing practical empathy with those constrained by society - thus opposing the Canon's ' aestheticism'.

It can be gathered from this evidence, that whether Brontë's Heathcliff and Cathy find themselves figuratively shoulder-to-shoulder with the Tolstoy and Shakespeares of the fictional worlds prized in western academia is likely an unimportant fact. Wuthering Heights is already considered a dull classic by most, and the label of being officially ' worthy of study', needn't dampen its appeal further. Asimov claimed that ' self-education is the best kind' and this rings true in approaching literature as well as science. Often, the most valuable literary experiences are ones that take place outside the public political landscape of the school classroom or lecture theatre, and are rather enriched by one's own personal reflections on the art in the moment, not judgements forced for the sake of acceptance or examination results. In the minds of those keen readers, Wuthering Heights is world-renowned for its originality, rebellious themes, and embodiment of base desires so seldom allowed to escape in polite society- for good reason- and which so dramatically deviate from the (subjective) ' universally pleasing' idea of Canon. The novel's position in regards to the canon is irrelevant to its existing and extensive merit.