

# Feminist' ideas in emily bronte's "wuthering heights" essay sample

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## **Feminist' Ideas in Emily Bronte's “ Wuthering Heights” Essay Sample**

Women's rights have been a question greatly discussed for quite some time, and the debate is still continuing despite the possibilities offered to women today. Feminism nowadays has evolved into a movement in a number of directions, starting with women equality and ending with homosexuality. However, feminism originally is an ideology that is based on equal political, economic and social rights for women. Feminism theory deals with analysing women's social roles and experiences in relation to gender inequality. Traces of this ideology are vastly represented and can be found in a number of literary works, as notable examples are novels written by female authors (the Brontë sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot and others) during the Age of Realism. The Age of Realism/the Victorian period was a crucial period in world's literature. It was a period in which writers discarded idealizing and romanticizing and instead opted for depicting things as they were. In addition the new approach to writing, the Victorian period is also noteworthy for new beliefs upon a number of things in human life, including, social environment, perception of personality and individual as such; moreover, the period was even more significant due to the changes in women's lives.

The 19th century was a time during which women were fighting to obtain certain rights that were not delegated to them before, e. g. as education was expanding, women had the chance to be educated; they also had the option to financially support themselves by working. This fight is one of many representations of feminism theory as we know it today. Female authors of

the time used their writings to emphasize their rights to come out of submission enforced on them and make a life on their own without the burden of men dominion. ' Many women assumed the opportunity of using the life they saw around them to construct novels which would capture a picture of contemporary life as well as attract readers to identify themselves to the characters presented.' (Online 1) One of the most prominent female writers in 19th century was Emily Brontë with her novel *Wuthering Heights*. This essay will concentrate on the representation of feminism by the use of women characters in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, namely Catherine Earnshaw, Catherine Linton (Cathy), Nelly Dean and Isabella Linton.

Each of these characters illustrates the power possessed by women, the hopes and feelings of women - their inner world. This novel is a wonderful representation of the life of women under the authority of men, and of women as individuals and their fight for a better (more independent) life - aspects that will be analysed in this essay. Emily Brontë has chosen to include in her novel *Wuthering Heights* a number of female characters. Each of her characters is different and each of them has their own part in expressing the author's beliefs and viewpoints on matters concerning women lives and their rights. These characters are her contribution to feminism. Simone de Beauvoir in her *Introduction to the Second Sex* (1949: 323) states that ' throughout history they (women) have always been subordinated to men, and hence their dependency is not the result of a historical event or a social change - it was not something that occurred.' Male dominance is a continuous process of life, as we do live a man's world

and that is obvious in the novel, as women are highly dependent on men.

Moreover, de Beauvoir (ibid: 321) quotes Benda:

' The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter seems wanting in significance by itself...Man can think of himself without a woman. She cannot think of herself without man.'

This position is emphasized in *Wuthering Heights* through the character of Nelly Dean. Nelly has a clear understanding of her position in any household, she refers to herself as ' a servant merely'. Her connection to the order of relationship between man and women is what makes the character notable and separates her from other female characters of the novel. Nelly represents not only the power and wisdom of women, but also her compliance to dominance of men. ' Nelly Dean is a manipulative creature who will go to considerable lengths to maintain the status quo of male authority.' (Whitley, 2000: xi) By adding this trait to Nelly's character Brontë reminds the reader of the order of the world. Even though the characters are fighting and representing women's rights, they still do live in a man's world - that is the novel's connection with the reality. The character of Nelly is a great support to the statement of de Beauvoir (1949: 324):

' At the present time, when women are beginning to take part in the affairs of the world, it is still a world that belongs to men - they have no doubt of it and women have scarcely any. To decline to be the Other, to refuse to be a party to the deal - this would be for women to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste.'

All characters in the novel are living in a man's world; nevertheless, the author has tried to change this world by the help of her characters. She shows a myriad of opportunities and different paths of life that woman can take, and more importantly she does not show a perfect world, where women get everything they want, she shows a world where woman do make mistakes, but at the same time they are the ones that pay for these mistakes and correct them. This novel is noteworthy for the fact that a woman is given a word to tell a story. This fact alone is a testimony not only of a new period in literature, but also of the progress of women in general, as before the Age of Realism women were never chosen as narrators; moreover, they were rarely encountered as the main characters of literary works in general. J. S. Whitley in introduction of Wordsworth Classics edition of ' Wuthering Heights' refers to Nelly as the narrator that tells the story ' to create herself as central figure: the moral, rational hub of the tale, holding everything together'. (Whitley, 2000: x)

However it must be taken into account that Nelly cannot be considered to be a reliable narrator; therefore, whatever she tells the reader, she does it from her own perspective. This is another trait of feminism, as Brontë depicts each woman as an individuality whose personality is not dependent on men and yet they have to find and accept their place in the world. In this novel these women are given a word. As de Beauvoir (1949: 328) writes:

' The drama of women lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego) - who always regards the self is the essential - and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential.'

Emily Brontë also uses other characters that have noticeable personality. These women are fighting for themselves and for their right to be individualities. Catherine Earnshaw, later to become Catherine Linton, she symbolises the rebelliousness of women and their fight for their future. Female authors of 19th century ' in choosing their female protagonists [...] prefer capability to beauty'. Rehnuma Bint Ani, an Assistant Professor of Department of English Language and Literature, International Islamic University Chittagong describes Cathy as follows:

' Cathy, when we first meet her in Wuthering Heights, in her wild and tempestuous nature seems to be the very embodiment of the windswept moors, revealing in all the bleakness, the loneliness, the storm-tossed vicissitudes of that countryside. She is too strong either to be tamed or to be adored. But the aura of power in her character, even as a child, is unmistakable.' (Online 1)

Catherine has a passionate nature – she is wild and untamed, and she retains her personality even though she grows and develops into a respectable lady of the Thrushcross Grange she never changes those aspects of her personality. Her permanent personality represents the essence of women – their strength and wish to control their own lives. This wish of control is in stark contrast to the women-men relationship that is describes by Simone de Beauvoir. She insists that women ' have gained only what men have been willing to grant; they have taken nothing, they have only received.' (de Beauvoir, 323) Brontë in Wuthering Heights presents a world, where women are not afraid to take what they want and to fight for a

better life. Another important aspect of Brontë's novel is the emphasis on education that is strongly connected with women's fight for their rights and consequently is reflected in the personalities of the characters. The author shows the importance of education in the depiction of all characters, and education is an important subject for women at the time.

The feminism theory (de Beauvoir, 324) states that in economic sphere men and women have different positions, men do get better jobs and higher wages which, logically, is depicted in the novels written during the Age of Realism; therefore, this aspect is very obvious in this novel as well. Brontë very successfully represents the first step to amend this situation. Through Nelly the author has asserted the value of education. Nelly herself implies: 'You could not open a book in this library that I have not looked into, and got something out of also...' (Brontë, 1992: 44) In Catherine's character the author once again emphasizes the importance of education; however, where Nelly undertakes self-education, Catherine is educated by a local curate along with other children, and is introduced to the merits of education and sophisticated lifestyle in the house of Lintons. The time spent with the Lintons is a crucial point in the novel, as it formulates Catherine's dreams and plans for the future. Although during her childhood Catherine was more prompt to running around freely than sitting by the books, after her stay with the Lintons; though, she remains the same person, 'the necessity of education for an improved, independent and dignified life does not escape her'. (Online 1)

The value of education is also represented in Cathy's character. Cathy's father is her tutor and she is more than happy to learn: ' Fortunately, curiosity and a quick intellect urged her into an apt scholar: she learnt rapidly and eagerly, and did honour to his teaching.' (Brontë, 1992: 137)

What is even more prominent in this novel in connection to feminism ideology is the character of Isabella Linton. Although the character is not one of the most important characters, it is the most relevant in connection to feminism. Isabella marries Heathcliff under the false impression of him loving her. She also fights for her rights - rights to love and marry whomever she chooses no matter whether her brother approves of the union or not. However, due to her rashness, she is forced to suffer a life alongside a violent and cruel husband. Although, she does not hold a great place in the novel, Isabella as a character is used by the author to emphasize women rights and capability by leaving Heathcliff even though she carries his child.

Isabella is capable of standing on her own two feet - away from men aid and control. She manages to live alone and support herself and her son - that was something that was unacceptable prior the Victorian period. Woman alone with a child was socially unacceptable position; however, 19th century authors stood for the rights of women to work and support themselves, with or without men approval. Through Isabella the author puts greater emphasis on women rights to work and support themselves. Isabella is a woman that makes her own choices, and if the choice is a mistake, she holds the power to rectify her mistakes by using whatever means she considers to be necessary. As feminism also deals with domestic violence, Brontë has also



touched upon this issue by using the character of Isabella; moreover, she goes as far as showing the woman's independence and strength in this type of situation. All in all the novel *Wuthering Heights*, though not directly, but is saturated with elements connected with feminism and women's rights. The elements of feminism ideology that are represented by Brontë are closely linked with the female characters of the novel.

Firstly, Brontë does not depict the ideal world where women rule, instead she depicts a world that is fairly close to reality, a world that belongs to men; moreover, even this aspect is clearly shown through the character of Nelly Dean. Secondly, the female characters in the novel all are strong personalities, and they are the main doers in the novel. The character of Nelly is even employed as the narrator, which was an uncommon occurrence during the time. Other characters are used to show the women strength and will in choosing their own path and in standing against men in a world that does not belong to them.

Thirdly, even more prominent aspects of feminism are the emphasizing of the value of education (all female characters have, one way or another, received some type of education), and such blatant show of female independence as woman rising and supporting a child on her own (Isabella Linton). Nevertheless what has not been mentioned in the essay so far is the belief of Emily Brontë that men and women can coexist without overpowering each other. This trait is shown in the character of Cathy Linton. The most important aspect of Cathy as a character is her symbolic role as the representative of harmony between men and women – she is able to

achieve what no other female character in the novel could. She ends the string of tragedies with achieving happiness with Hareton; she ends the fight of men and women by helping him to learn – she helps him to aspire to something greater and she is walking alongside him in the inscrutable path of life rather than dominating over him.

## References

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