

The Reader vs. Nelly and Lockwood

A key question in the classroom concerns how we are to assess the figures constructed in the novel's frame story. Because Nelly and Lockwood are simultaneously characters in the frame story and in the main story, the question becomes very knotty. Discussion in the classroom is always helped, I think, if we keep the double position of Nelly and Lockwood clearly in mind, especially when it comes to judging the degree to which we accept their adequacy as conveyors of the main story. The point of my essay would be to demonstrate that Nelly and Lockwood place the meanings of the main story within the brackets of their moralistic and class consciousness. The reader's role in Wuthering Heights, in the first instance, is to break through the locked and gated narrative that the discourse of Nelly and Lockwood offer. In this role, the reader also is cued to seek communicative connection with the novel's implied author, Ellis Bell. The process of that seeking mirrors the novel's investigation of the boundary between socially imposed and organically nurtured human relationships. What I am saying is that the very reader of Wuthering Heights instantiates the shift in the premises of social being that is one of the novel's fundamental motives.

A clarification of the presumptive positions of Nelly and Lockwood is the first order of business.

Wuthering Heights is often treated as though it filtered its narrative through a successive order of narrating consciousnesses. While it is true that Lockwood begins as a narrator, he soon slips very comfortably into his position as auditor. The frame story tells us of this shift in chapter four which dramatizes the scene of narration as shared by Nelly the teller and Lockwood the listener.

The major development of my essay would be to show that this scene of potential authentic human connection is fatally undermined by the framers. Nelly is not telling the story: she is, in effect, writing it. Lockwood is not listening to the story: he is, in effect, reading it.

Wuthering Heights is pervasively concerned with varying levels of intersubjectivity as reflected in different forms of communication—silence, speech, manuscript, and print. One of the great triumphs of the novel is its projection of a narrative almost exclusively in dialogue. The implied author of the novel generates a written text that is insistently dedicated to the primacy of the spoken word.

But Nelly, in her narrative of the main story, gives us the seamless structure of writing. Nelly never probes, or searches into the multiple mysteries of the story she delivers. It comes rolling out of her with the linear coherence of the already written. Nor does she ever use the presence of a living listener to gauge her own story. Lockwood, on the other hand, is not listening to the story. He remains in the chained posture of the silent reader, the figure of "mass privacy" that emerged in the new novel-reading public of the nineteenth century. He does with

the narrative exactly what he does with the adorable young lady he sees at the resort: he never speaks out. Lockwood has been granted radical knowledge during his night in the paneled bed. And yet, even at points in the story that converge uncannily with the revelations to which he has been privy, he never enters the privileged space of face-to-face discourse. He treats Nelly as a book, just as she treats her story as a finalized text. (The great reversal to Nelly and Lockwood is given in the relation of Cathy and Hareton which transforms the estrangements raised by the written into the connections available in the spoken .)

The provocation of Nelly and Lockwood turning the scene of narrative from an oral discourse into the simulacrum of a written discourse defines, by opposition, the implied reader's role. The implied reader must fill the space vacated by Lockwood and so draw nearer to Ellis Bell's formidable investment in the oral as the site of authentic intersubjectivity. The only way to do this is to perform the role that Lockwood refuses to perform: to question the story, to take on Lockwood's hidden knowledge, fears, and repressed desire and use them as leverage to search out the meanings of the prodigious conflicts that erupt among the characters and the extraordinary symmetries that seem to govern their lives. The reader must try to hear the story, to re-establish the scene of face-to-face storytelling that the framers have vouchsafed. Only by resisting the imprisoning silences of Lockwood's vacuity and Nelly's refusals can the implied reader of Wuthering Heights reach the dense, luminous, "con-trary," and Coleridgean narrative of identity that Ellis Bell has created.

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