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The Unreliable Narrator in *Wuthering Heights*

GIDEON SHUNAMI

THE POINT OF VIEW in *Wuthering Heights* results from a combination of two speakers who outline the events of the plot within the framework of a story within a story. The frame story is that of Lockwood, who informs us of his meeting with the strange and mysterious “family” living in almost total isolation in the stony uncultivated land of northern England. The inner story is that of Nelly Dean, who transmits to Lockwood the history of the two families during the last two generations. Nelly Dean examines the events retrospectively and attempts to report them as an objective eyewitness to Lockwood. But for various reasons which will be specified later, Nelly lacks the qualities and qualifications necessary for her to be a reliable narrator.¹

Nelly Dean, the chronicler of the two families, seems to be a minor figure in the plot. She serves as an eyewitness who is familiar with what occurs due to her role as governess in the beginning of the novel and as overseer at its end. Ostensibly, her figure and function are both entirely incidental in relation to the major protagonists, but a more thorough probe into her activities and utterances will disclose that she is entangled in the plot much more deeply than would seem at first glance. Criticism, generally, regards Nelly

¹ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 159. Booth makes an essential point in his following definition of the unreliable narrator: “It is most often a matter of what James calls inconstancy; the narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him.”

Dean as a robust figure, vital and positive, who attempts to do everything for the sake of the family for which she works. This notion was no doubt also influenced by Charlotte Brontë's sympathetic approach toward the figure of the governess.²

Most critics emphasize the stability of the figure of Nelly throughout *Wuthering Heights*. McKibben maintains that for the length of the novel Nelly Dean remains steadfast and without permitting a breach in her limited world.³ Dorothy Van Ghent, in her important book on the English novel, emphasizes the function of Nelly Dean as one who verifies with great reliability the objectivity of the extraordinary events occurring in *Wuthering Heights*.⁴ Romberg, in his book dealing with the first person novel, notes that the author has used the honest bourgeois characters of the narrators as a sort of security for the empirical existence of the wildly romanesque principal figures.⁵

Other critics have misgivings here and there over the complete stability of Nelly, but they do not doubt her general reliability. Woodring claims that Nelly Dean remains fundamentally a credible witness because of her skepticism about supernatural phenomena, although her personality sometimes alters according to the local demands of the plot.⁶ Mathison opposes the customary approach which explains Nelly Dean's existence as a dry technical device; and he stresses her aptness to describe the occurrences accurately. But, along with this, her pedestrian approach to the tempestuous characters of the novel manifests her essential misunderstanding of them. Thus, Nelly Dean's character, as an expression

² Charlotte Brontë, "Editor's Preface to the New Edition of *Wuthering Heights* (1850)," in *Wuthering Heights*, ed. William M. Sale, Jr. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), p. 11.

³ Robert C. McKibben, "The Image of the Book in *Wuthering Heights*," *NCF*, 15 (1960), 168-69.

⁴ *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Rinehart, 1953), p. 155. Miss Van Ghent adds that Lockwood is also a reliable witness who accepts Nelly Dean's account and thereby helps to expand the story into its recognized psychological realm.

⁵ Bertil Romberg, *Studies in the Narrative Techniques of the First-person Novel*, trans. Michael Taylor and Harold H. Borland (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1962), p. 66. Romberg brings up this matter in regard to the technique of using primary and secondary narratives. He notes Emily Brontë's virtuosity in the employment of this technique as an artistic device.

⁶ Carl R. Woodring in "The Narrators of *Wuthering Heights*," *NCF*, 11 (1957), 302-3, treats the pair of narrators as a vital literary stratagem in the novel. Nelly appears in a succession of roles: as judge, interpreter, chorus, detective, and confessional priest.

of utter normalcy, is not suited to a comprehension of the central figures. The result, moreover, is a misunderstanding which exerts itself in giving bad advice and at times causes harm to the protagonists.⁷

Ever since Charlotte Brontë's "introduction," most of the critics and exegetes of *Wuthering Heights* have agreed in a general manner with the accepted idea that Nelly Dean is a reliable narrator. To the extent that there are defects or inconsistencies in her behavior, these are connected to her formal function and not to her lack of personal trustworthiness.

Krupat views things from a different perspective than that of his predecessors. In his opinion, "we have really no reliable word from anyone in the book as to how to take it." This is a consequence of the fact that "Nelly and Lockwood . . . have styles best suited to the narration of the trivial, not the important." Therefore, "if the vision is very special—odd, strange, whatever—most of the words are not."⁸ But this still does not explain the mystery of Nelly's personality and the extent of her individual reliability.

Hafley, however, attempts to explain these things by undermining the conventional notion of Nelly Dean. According to his view, Nelly Dean is the "villain" of the novel and not Heathcliff, the choice of the vast majority of the critics. He maintains that Nelly Dean plots to gain control over the two estates—and she could accomplish this only after the removal of Heathcliff and her assuming authority over Cathy. Although Cathy is in fact left as mistress in the conclusion of the novel, she is not equipped to inherit the administration of the estates, and she consigns their care to the hands of treacherous Nelly.⁹

According to this view, Nelly Dean distorts the pattern of events in order to justify her decisions and actions to Lockwood, who knows nothing about what has happened and believes her account from the beginning. Hafley's position asserts that the unreliable

⁷ John K. Mathison in "Nelly Dean and the Power of *Wuthering Heights*," *NCF*, 11 (1956), 106–7, 114, 118, opposes the approach that Nelly Dean is simply a technical device. He asserts that she is the explicator of the plot, the index of morality, and the evaluator of actions. The reader's agreement with Nelly's reflections and ethical judgment fixes his understanding of the work and its power.

⁸ Arnold Krupat, "The Strangeness of *Wuthering Heights*," *NCF*, 25 (1970), 271, 279.

⁹ James Hafley, "The Villain in *Wuthering Heights*," *NCF*, 13 (1958), 213.

point of view uncovers for us Nelly Dean's malicious, dissembling approach which reveals only the material suitable for justifying her wicked actions. But does the novel *Wuthering Heights* in fact truly concern itself with a dramatization of the problems of evil in our world? Is Nelly Dean or Heathcliff a "villain" in Emily Brontë's work, or is this perhaps a novel without "villains"? And, for that matter, is the novel narrated from a reliable or unreliable point of view? And what is the relationship between the point of view and the conduct of the novel's protagonists?



To arrive at an answer to these questions, we must first attempt to examine all of Nelly Dean's sources of information. They are many and varied: beginning with the direct testimony of her eyes and ears, continuing with the extensive confessions of the protagonists and with the detailed letters which they send her of their own free will, and concluding with her eavesdropping behind locked doors, delving into closed drawers, and slyly peeping—of which the major figures of the novel have no idea. Several explanations can be advanced for this complex form of gathering information:

1. Nelly Dean is not a real personality but a literary device, a well-known convention taken from the Gothic novel, the function of which is to portray the events in a more mysterious and exciting manner. Since Nelly Dean, who performs as just a minor character and has a very limited conception of what occurs in the plot, must transmit to the reader all of the information concerning the novel's protagonists and their activities, she has to obtain her material from "external" and arbitrary sources. These sources are not linked to internal psychological process of the characters of the novel or to the plot produced by the network of relationships among them. Instead, they arise from the "literary" imperative to supply the reader with the required information at any price. There is thus no necessary connection between the form in which information is furnished and the vital working out of the plot. Therefore, Nelly Dean, who is not an organic part of the complex narrative universe, serves merely as an artificial authorial device for more dramatic portrayal of the novel's events.

2. Nelly Dean is a personality in herself who is intertwined with the novel's narrative universe and constitutes an organic part of it. Nelly Dean has a wide grasp of what happens because of her objective proximity to most of the characters in the novel. The work's heroes (heroes

indeed!) trust her and at times confess to her, since she is outside of the inner narrative circle. Nelly occupies a humble social stratum and cannot attain the exalted position of the heroes; she does not have far-reaching ambitions, and she easily reconciles herself to her inferior status. Sympathetic to the suffering of others, she is always prepared to assist with good advice. She therefore can be seen as a type of ideal figure. Nelly's sense of her own responsibility as the key to minimizing family complications impels her, in order to prevent unfortunate developments, to gather additional information not given to her directly and freely. Her faithfulness to the heads of the house and her demanding feeling of responsibility are especially evident in regard to the spiritual weakness of her masters. She is motivated, justifiably in her eyes, to accumulate material in order to protect them at any cost. A necessary connection is thus created between the means of obtaining information and the development of the plot; and Nelly Dean, as a reliable narrator, plays an inseparable part in this.

3. Nelly Dean is a character possessing a unique personality. She is specifically linked to the narrative pattern of the novel as one of the performers in it when she, like the others, behaves out of motives which are personal and at times even selfish. Out of such vital human interests, Nelly Dean draws out the tongues of the protagonists, hearkens to their secrets, and searches their minds. She thereby attempts to approach the characters despite her lowly position, in order to find a family structure in which she has no share. Nelly exploits the informational resources known only by her and the special circumstances of the narrative in order to join the intricate system of relationships among the novel's heroes. Because of her emotional ignorance and sterility, Nelly strangely aligns herself with the heroines and covertly directs their secret wishes in line with her personal desires. In this regard, it is impossible to understand the plot without a comprehension of the motives, deeds, and commentary of Nelly Dean. For Nelly is not simply an indistinguishable segment of the novel's complicated plot but in large measure creates it anew—in part through her actions at the time of the events and in part through a total reconstruction of the events in her story to Lockwood, for the sake of a justification of her actions in the past. In terms of this approach, if she does not have malicious intentions, Nelly Dean is at least an unreliable narrator. It is necessary to treat her account skeptically and with cautious criticism.

We shall attempt to prove that Nelly Dean is an unreliable narrator. It is only by means of the unique point of view of this woman that we will be able to understand properly the characteristics of the heroes of the novel as well as the interpretation of the plot flowing from their actions. In this light, it becomes clear that Nelly Dean's

role in the novel is radically different from what criticism has thus far conceived it as. Likewise, the interpretation of the plot which results from her unusual perspective can freshly illuminate many of the extraordinary and enigmatic events which occur in *Wuthering Heights*.

As a central character in the work, in her own right, Nelly Dean is not exempt from a limited, subjective view of events which happen before her eyes. Therefore, as we shall attempt to prove further, even the version of the narrative presented by her is indeed unreliable. We must first examine the causes which influenced Nelly's sometimes amazing mode of behavior toward her superiors, behavior which is in complete contrast to what is expected of her. After that, we must decipher the meaning of her interpretation to Lockwood, by means of which she tries to mask her conduct in the past. And finally, we must analyze the ironic and ambiguous dialogue between her and Lockwood as an argument for her principal function as unreliable narrator.



In the beginning of her story, Nelly Dean already notes the position of equality which she occupied when young, with the owner of the estate's children, Catherine and Hindley. She would join in their games and, like them, receive gifts from their father, Mr. Earnshaw (ch. 4). A feeling of imagined equality with the Earnshaw family thus developed in her from an early age. She considered herself a part of this family, with all of the responsibilities and privileges which that entails. Nelly is unprepared from the outset to accept the authority of the young Catherine, just as she does not submit to her rule when Catherine later becomes mistress. Nelly observes that when still a child Catherine loved to play the role of the young mistress by using her hands freely and commanding her friends. Catherine behaved this way toward Nelly as well, but the latter made her understand that she would suffer neither slaps nor orders (ch. 5).

Since Nelly has no private life of her own and, in contrast to Catherine, no romantic involvement or prospects for a family, she unconsciously effaces her own feminine personality and loses herself more and more in the life of her mistress. She thus unknowingly

compensates for her thwarted romantic longings with Catherine's lovers, thereby determining that Catherine remain ignorant of her own romantic and conjugal future. In one of the principal scenes of the novel, Nelly conceals from Catherine the fact that Heathcliff has listened in to the confession Catherine has made to her; she thus causes Catherine to be unaware of the tragic separation between the two lovers. Catherine emphasizes in her confession:

I've no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven; and if the wicked man in there had not brought Heathcliff so low, I shouldn't have thought of it. It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now; so he shall never know how I love him.¹⁰

Immediately after Catherine's declaration, Nelly observes Heathcliff slip outside, but she says nothing about it to Catherine. Nelly's surprising behavior, as a result of which Catherine is gradually destroyed during the course of the novel, results from her latent feeling that she can manage her mistress' life better than her mistress.

This conviction is emphasized even more in Nelly Dean's immediate reaction to the conclusion of Catherine's confession. Catherine suffers from a deep love which she is now unable to realize due to Nelly's fatal silence, and she uncovers the roots of her attraction to Heathcliff: "Nelly, I am Heathcliff—he's always, always in my mind—not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself—but as my own being" (9:74). But Nelly, due to her personal limitations and her particular complexes, is incapable of understanding the spirit of the girl who prefers Heathcliff to Edgar, and everything Nelly has to say in this painful situation is epitomized in the following statement:

If I can make any sense of your nonsense, Miss, it only goes to convince me that you are ignorant of the duties you undertake in marrying; or else that you are a wicked, unprincipled girl. But trouble me with no more secrets. I'll not promise to keep them. (9:74)

It is probable that Nelly has already decided, for clear social reasons, that Catherine should marry the wealthy Edgar and not penni-

¹⁰ Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. William M. Sale, Jr. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), 9:72. Page references in the essay refer to this edition; for convenience I cite both chapter and page numbers.

less Heathcliff. Therefore, she must do everything she can to banish the foolish love for Heathcliff from Catherine's mind. When Heathcliff's sudden disappearance becomes known, the roles are ironically reversed, and the servant, in a patronizing, self-confident manner, charges her lady with what she considers to be her fault: ". . . to lay the blame of his disappearance on her (where indeed it belonged, as she well knew)" (9:79). Nelly thus exonerates herself as she places the guilt for her own actions on her mistress and continues in her unwitting hypocrisy in the further course of events as well.

With the return of Heathcliff, relations between Catherine and Edgar are undermined; and Catherine, sinking into a world of confused delusions, becomes incurably ill. Even on Catherine's death bed, Nelly does not comprehend her spirit, just as she is unaware of her role in the intricate complex of relationships among the characters of the novel. In her last moments, Catherine senses that someone is following her activities and examining her reactions. However, she does not realize that it is only Nelly, her constant companion, who, out of a misguided decision, unknowingly determines her fate. Only Catherine and Nelly are in the closed room, yet Catherine apprehends danger lurking nearby. While gazing into the mirror, she calls out: "Don't you see that face?" After trying to calm her, Nelly takes Catherine's hand and resolutely declares: "There's nobody here! . . . It was yourself Mrs. Linton, you knew it a while since." But Catherine refuses to be appeased, and Nelly tries again: "That is the glass—the mirror, Mrs. Linton; and you see yourself in it, and there I am too, by your side" (12:105–6). Nelly's reflection in the mirror, beside Catherine, represents Catherine's fears that, because of her own weakening will, Nelly will soon seize control.

Nelly presents this position to Lockwood since, due to her personal shortcomings and one-sidedness, she believes it to be an example of a deluded and sick woman's impulsive outbursts. Since they were expressed in the midst of hysterical outpourings, she thus is not apprehensive about transmitting to Lockwood in detail all of Catherine's accusations against her. She is confident that he will distinguish between the confused delusions of a pathetically sick patient and the self-evident truth coming from a healthy and "spontaneous" woman like herself. This approach also demonstrates that

Nelly is not the villain of the novel but that her sanctimonious position results from an ignorance of her true role and a misunderstanding of the spirit of others. She is therefore incapable of recognizing the fact that her decisions bring about the tragic crisis of the novel.

When Catherine hears Nelly's observations to Edgar on Heathcliff's treachery, the meaning of Nelly's actions in the past finally becomes apparent to her, and she lashes out furiously: "Ah! Nelly has played traitor. . . . Nelly is my hidden enemy. You witch!" (12:110). Even Edgar is angered at Nelly, who has concealed Catherine's incurable illness from him for several days, and threatens to dismiss her. Nelly escapes his accusations with the excuse that she did not know Catherine's condition since she was not allowed into her room.

Furthermore, when Nelly discovers that Isabella Linton has gone off with Heathcliff, she refrains from telling the head of the house anything in order to prevent "embarrassment." However, in this instance as well, her silence unwittingly initiates the fatal sequence leading to Isabella's tragedy. Nelly, who justifies her momentous silences with the desire to prevent discomfort to her superiors, does not understand during the course of events that the vital information she has obtained is liable to change the direction of the lives of the novel's main characters. However, toward the conclusion of the narrative, with the appearance of Lockwood, Nelly recapitulates to her guest all of the events in terms of an unconscious blurring of her own guilt by exaggerating her description of the shattered spiritual condition of the other protagonists. Nelly Dean thus fashions the narrative from scratch by recounting authentic developments as well as by adding her own touches of exaggeration in regard to the heroes' actions and by supposedly obliterating her own harmful deeds.

A suggestion of Nelly's awareness of a sense of guilt for Catherine's tragic end is indicated by her words when Edgar enters the scene and she tries to separate Catherine from Heathcliff. She cannot free herself from the burden of blame for Catherine's death in the prime of life. But Nelly attempts, in her account to Lockwood, to create the impression that Catherine's death saved herself and her family from incalculable suffering and hardships. Nelly thus describes her reflections to Lockwood: "She's fainted or dead, so

much the better. Far better that she should be dead, than lingering a burden and a misery-maker to all about her" (15:136).

This feeling of guilt leads Nelly in the second part of the novel to attach herself to the orphan Cathy. It is as if she were her own daughter rather than the child whom Edgar calls "Cathy" to distinguish her from her mother Catherine (ch. 17). Nelly acts chiefly to prevent Cathy from falling into the hands of Heathcliff, to whom Nelly proceeds to attribute all of the misfortunes which befell the inhabitants of the two estates. After Catherine's death, Nelly takes advantage of the weakness of Edgar, Cathy's father, in order to take her under her own guidance. Nelly, for all practical purposes, becomes Cathy's adopted mother. In order to justify her devoted attachment to Cathy, despite all that eventually happens to her as a consequence of her own carelessness, Nelly entirely reshapes the course of events and attempts to remove the responsibility for the "educational" failures from herself. Nelly Dean, meddling in all of the twists and complications of the second part of *Wuthering Heights*, is thus turned into an even more unreliable narrator than she was in the first part.

Nelly is the only one aware of Cathy's meetings with the young Linton, and she takes on herself the serious responsibility of concealing them from Edgar. She also makes Cathy promise not to tell her father about her visit to Wuthering Heights and her encounter with Hareton. At the very moment she is least suited to approach the position of real mother as a result of constant anxiety over her future in Edgar's uneasy household, Nelly thus becomes Cathy's guardian, attempting to fill the role of concerned mother.¹¹

Therefore, after each of her "educational" failures with Cathy, Nelly prefers to conceal the bitter truth from Edgar, provided that he continue to place his confidence in her and let her remain in unchallenged authority over Cathy. Nelly continues in her particu-

¹¹ See John Frazer's "The Name of Action: Nelly Dean and *Wuthering Heights*," *NCF*, 20 (1965), 223-24, 226. According to Frazer, Nelly is a reliable narrator although she does at times display errors in judgment (for example, when she is not concerned about the danger of Catherine's illness or when she does not prevent Cathy's repeated visits to Wuthering Heights). He contends that her mistakes proceed from her fundamental condition of "observer in a net," similar to that of many of the characters of Henry James. Nelly's situation thus resembles that of the governess in James's *The Turn of the Screw* in that both are trapped (due to economic reasons, a moralistic approach, and a sympathetic attitude toward suffering souls) by different forms of cruelty and have to react decisively.

lar supervision of Cathy's actions, and she reveals Linton's love letters to her after a prolonged search of her cabinet. Only after Cathy confesses to Nelly the history of her meetings with Linton and the issue becomes a scandal does Nelly discuss the matter in a general manner with Edgar. However, she still conceals the most crucial details from him. And Nelly nevertheless continues to placate Edgar as if there were no reason to worry about Cathy, since, as Nelly notes: "I'll stand her friend and counsellor to the last" (25:206). The irony implicit in this sentence becomes apparent only at the end, when Cathy finally frees herself from Nelly's custody and dubious counsel and constructs her future on her own.

Toward the end of the novel, Nelly feels sufficient confidence in her success to tell Lockwood her story from her unique point of view. And then, when what to her knowledge would finally subdue Lockwood that she had indeed done everything possible to save the remaining characters from Heathcliff's diabolical cunning, Nelly un.masks herself to Lockwood and makes an extremely important remark. This remark calls attention to the problem which has been bothering her all the while and which proves that her story is unreliable:

I seated myself in a chair, and rocked, to and fro, passing harsh judgment on my many derelictions of duty; from which, it struck me then, all the misfortunes of all my employers sprang. It was not the case, in reality, I am aware; but it was, in my imagination, that dismal night, and I thought Heathcliff himself less guilty than I. (27:220)

Nelly notes that it was not thus in "reality" but merely in her "imagination." Her particular grasp of reality is thereby revealed, as the facts are formulated and offered according to the relative comfort of the speaker. Yet Nelly does not function as a narrator designed to conceal her destructive actions.¹² Instead, she is a figure possessing human weaknesses who attempts in her story, sometimes unconsciously, to camouflage the many mistakes she has made by positing herself as a genuine and dedicated heroine in contrast to the villainous, cunning Heathcliff. It is possible that she would have failed in her objective if Lockwood had not filled the role of second narrator. But as one who transmits verbatim to the reader

¹² Hafley, p. 213.

the information he has heard from her without any critical observations at all and out of a naïve faith in her uncorroborated words, he as well bears responsibility for the unreliable shaping of “reality” in *Wuthering Heights*.



The events of the plot, already filtered through an unreliable narrator, are presented to the reader in terms of Lockwood’s ridiculous commentary. In his extreme naïveté, he believes that he understands the characters and their actions on just a first impression. As will become clear, Lockwood thereby ironically intensifies Nelly Dean’s unreliability as narrator.

At the conclusion, Lockwood enters the narrative universe of intrigue when he carries a note from Nelly Dean to Cathy, so that Cathy would transmit to Nelly her situation in *Wuthering Heights*. At this stage in the novel’s action, as Nelly attempts to restore Cathy to her by means of Lockwood, whose sentimental infatuation with Cathy she immediately succeeds in understanding, the two narrators are united. However, Lockwood, consistent with his ingenuous approach from the beginning, is sure that Nelly in fact sent him unintentionally; and he is determined to exploit his mission by pursuing his romantic objectives without feeling that he is merely being manipulated by the cunning Nelly (ch. 31).

On this view, as the reader is informed about what occurs from two sources, the importance of the dual perspective becomes apparent. Neither of these is reliable in itself, and both together create ironic sidetracks in the plot. Thus, Lockwood’s fondness for Cathy creates for him, even from the beginning of the novel, a distorted preconception of the figure of her mother, Catherine, in Nelly’s story. And just as he exaggerates in refashioning Cathy as an enchanted romantic figure, he likewise overdoes Catherine’s striking demonic image. This is clear from Lockwood’s words when he is first able to summarize Nelly’s story:

. . . let me beware of the fascination that lurks in Catherine Heathcliff’s [Cathy’s] brilliant eyes. I should be in a curious taking if I surrendered my heart to that young person, and the daughter turned out a second edition of the mother! (14:130)

The pattern of Lockwood's distorted views of Heathcliff, Hareton, and Cathy (as is clear from the series of wrongheaded characterizations in the introduction) prepares the reader to treat his assertions about Nelly's dependability even more circumspectly than those about these characters and others connected to them.

Lockwood's falling in love with Cathy creates an ironic diversion in the novel's development, especially when Nelly, from her position of inferiority in the complex network of relationships, nurses this attraction. She encourages Lockwood's affection for Cathy, arising in a manner parallel to that of the parodistic interlude between Linton and Cathy, when she hints at his feelings toward her:

I some way fancy no one could see Catherine Linton [Cathy] and not love her. You smile; but why do you look so lively and interested, when I talk about her? and why have you asked me to hang her picture over your fireplace? and why—? (25:204–5)

But Lockwood attempts to chill his feelings for Cathy, despite Nelly's strong and repeated experiments with their passions, as he muses: "She does not seem so amiable . . . as Mrs. Dean would persuade me to believe. She's a beauty, it is true; but not an angel" (31:237). Lockwood's words contain an ironic suggestion of Nelly Dean's unreliability as narrator. Despite his obtuseness and his pride, Lockwood conveys a sense of Nelly's exaggerations of the central protagonists in general and of Cathy in particular. Cathy is certainly not the enchanted romantic figure that he supposed at the outset, and it is likewise possible that the rest of the cast, and particularly Catherine and Heathcliff, are not the satanic monsters that they seemed to him at the beginning as a result of Nelly's story.

Thus, Nelly and Lockwood, in turn, each destroys the credibility of the other narrator's point of view. While Lockwood goes overboard in his romantic notions of Cathy, Nelly is similarly suspect in her distorted representations of the other protagonists. Nelly, for a variety of motives, cultivates an exaggerated Cathy for Lockwood. But his playful skepticism toward Nelly's veracity undercuts for the reader her stance of objectivity toward the other characters.

As an outsider, Lockwood has no prospects of establishing himself in the inner circle of events (even if he possessed a more force-

ful personality) due to a fundamental misunderstanding of the lives and fates of the characters. Lockwood's ardor for Cathy and his desire to lure her with him to the city also serve as an ironic counterpoint to the story of the mutual, earnest, and agonized falling in love of Cathy and Hareton—possible only in that outcast and lonely corner of Yorkshire. Clearly, the general situation at Wuthering Heights was not as somber as Nelly wanted Lockwood to feel, just as her attempt at matchmaking between Lockwood and Cathy was absurd and doomed to failure from the start as a result of her ignorance of what was going on there.

Nelly's failure to comprehend the events at Wuthering Heights becomes even more obvious at the end when Lockwood returns for a second time and perceives at first hand the urgent love of Cathy and Hareton. Nelly is not prepared to admit she miscalculated the prospects for relations between Lockwood and Cathy; she therefore conveniently places the responsibility on Lockwood, whom she sees as not making an effort to captivate Cathy. She thus turns to Lockwood and argues: "You see, Mr. Lockwood, it was easy enough to win Mrs. Heathcliff's [Cathy's] heart; but now, I'm glad you did not try. The crown of all my wishes will be the union of those two [Cathy and Hareton]" (32:249–50). Nelly instantly alters her strategy in order to keep up with the course of events. Since she wanted to preserve her maternal guardianship over Cathy even after her wedding, Nelly had attempted to marry her to Lockwood—not so much because of the uncertain state of the property as on account of her wish that Cathy's husband be simple and weak so that everything would be left in the hands of the determined overseer. Nelly therefore paints everything that happens in dark colors so that Lockwood in his utter simplicity will envision himself as the romantic hero sent to rescue Cathy from the "villains" surrounding her. However, Nelly, narrowly refashioning the plot for Lockwood in accordance with her subjective perspective, frustrates her own plans. Lockwood is the least appropriate to marry Cathy precisely because of the simplicity which for Nelly has qualified him for the designated role of Cathy's intended.

The narrators thereby function as integral characters in the plot only in order to demonstrate paradoxically that they are in fact no part of it. Their unreliable expositions and descriptions of the events ironically illuminate the plot when they are cast out of it

specifically because of their intention to thrust themselves into it at any cost. The conversations between them merely demonstrate with greater emphasis their incongruity in the role of reliable narrator.

Nelly, in fact, does not boast of how she relates her story to Lockwood in an objective manner. On the contrary, after Lockwood draws out of her a detailed description of the concatenation of events, she notes that she will continue her account in a style befitting a tale of gossip (7:59). In other words, Nelly's story is based on her own human reactions, her diligent probes, and her crafty exegeses of occurrences, and not on a direct and profound attempt at analysis of the pattern of relationships among the protagonists and the events which thereby result. Lockwood's simplicity is thus patently apparent in his total faith in all of Nelly Dean's words. This gullibility results from his absurd confidence in Nelly's depths of intelligence and wisdom, as he himself emphasizes: "I am sure that you have thought a great deal more than the generality of servants think. You have been compelled to cultivate your reflective faculties" (7:58). Nelly immediately seizes on Lockwood's statement in order to fortify his confidence in her own intellectual abilities and literary cultivation, despite her lowly status. In her response, she makes a very serious attempt to provide a basis for her acceptance as a credible and reliable narrator:

I have undergone sharp discipline which has taught me wisdom, and then, I have read more than you would fancy, Mr. Lockwood. You could not open a book in this library that I have not looked into, and got something out of also, unless it be that range of Greek and Latin, and that of French—and those I know one from another; it is as much as you can expect from a poor man's daughter. (7:59)

Yet her manifest desire to impress Lockwood with all of the books (and with her minor victory over the obstacles of the foreign languages) raises doubts about the candor of what she says. Moreover, it is not clear how she has enough time for study after her various household duties, her prolonged conversations with the characters, and her ceaseless investigations of their activities.

Halfway through the novel, Lockwood summarizes the way in which he will continue to transmit Nelly's story to the reader, as well as his impression of her as narrator:

I'll continue it in her own words, only a little condensed. She is, on the whole, a very fair narrator and I don't think I could improve her style. (15:130)

It is apparent from Lockwood's pronouncement that he narrates Nelly's story—despite slight and nonessential abridgments—as her filter. The account, in any case, is Nelly's; and Lockwood's significance is simply as a paradoxical illustration, through his innocence and simplicity, of Nelly's unreliability. When Lockwood chooses the words “a very fair narrator,” he thereby merely discloses his conception of Nelly Dean's veracity and of the world she describes. His view is not changed even after Nelly's own characteristically deceptive suggestion to him that her account is indeed unreliable. In one of her asides to Lockwood regarding the meaning of the events, Nelly notes: “. . . you'll judge as well as I can, all these things; at least, you'll think you will, and that's the same” (17:152). Nelly offers Lockwood the illusion of deciding for himself the significance of what occurs in her story. But in fact she is the one who directs him to evaluate, in accordance with her will, the characters and the nature of their deeds—without arousing in him the least suspicion of her narrative intentions.

Lockwood thus unwittingly serves as naïve commentator for an untrustworthy narrator. Yet, precisely through his exaggerated simplicity, he at times challenges Nelly Dean's narrative authority and inspires the reader to second thoughts concerning the dramatic occurrences unfolded before his eyes.



We must now examine the significance of the development of the heroes' actions in the novel as it is explained according to Nelly Dean's unreliable point of view. In the first part, Nelly follows Catherine's progress very closely and describes her personality in an untrustworthy fashion for a variety of reasons already discussed. Nelly, who gradually projects herself unconsciously into Catherine's tormented life, describes the stage of Catherine's youthful stormy love for Heathcliff and the stage of her neurotic reflections on her marriage with Edgar from a later vantage point. In both stages, Catherine is described as a tempestuous figure, wild and impulsive in her aggressive outbursts. Nelly's lack of reliability as

narrator is most prominent in the description of Catherine's unfortunate history. Nelly does not expand her description out of any great sympathy, and she does not in general reveal any true understanding except in the most difficult moments. And the reader's sympathy for Catherine increases the more that Nelly distances herself from the heroine of her story.¹³

However, the importance of Nelly's unreliable account is not limited merely to a strengthening of the reader's sympathy for the suffering protagonists. Instead, the principal effect is an enlargement of the reader's understanding of flesh and blood characters who are not evil and supernatural figments of the mind, such as Nelly presents to Lockwood in her account. As a result of her lack of psychological sensitivity and her lack of emotional understanding, Nelly is not equipped to describe the characters as they are. It is another instance of the confrontation, in most cases tragic, between "little" people of petty, restricted consciousnesses and strong, great-souled characters, the complexities of whose stormy personalities and the depth of whose agonies the former are incapable of comprehending because of their own personal limitations. Therefore, Nelly describes incidents of rowdy outbursts and noisy quarrels as an index to the characters, with no understanding of what motivates the characters or of their general outlook on life.

However, the reader must perceive the unreliability of the narrator if he wishes to penetrate beyond the mask of external appearances and to investigate what happens below the surface. Perhaps then it will become clear that the romantic, passionate heroes are merely realistic, silently suffering figures whose apparent external aggressiveness only testifies to their inner lack of confidence. Moreover, the misunderstanding between Nelly and the rest of the prominent characters in her story represents a lack of communication among the figures themselves.¹⁴ Thus, for example, Catherine confesses to Nelly in regard to Heathcliff that "he is more myself than I am" (9:72). Yet Nelly's fatal silence, as a consequence of which the two are separated for three years, draws attention to the deficiency of the relationship between the two lovers since child-

¹³ Mathison, p. 120.

¹⁴ See David Sonstroem's "*Wuthering Heights* and the Limits of Vision," *PMLA*, 86 (1971), 54. Sonstroem points out the lack of communion among the characters but completely ignores Nelly's important role in the system of relationships among them.

hood. Nelly's success in blurring responsibility for this is seen in her immediate words to Catherine and in her much later explanation to Lockwood; the lack of understanding on the part of these and other characters testifies to the fact that they are so dominated by their obsessions that they cannot absorb the truth hidden behind the thicket of others' words. The lack of communication between Catherine and Heathcliff is made conspicuous by Nelly's ignorance of the true meaning of their love. The unreliability of the narrator reflects the protagonists' inability to understand their associates in the plot.

In the second part, Nelly's story follows Cathy's development. It carries on the mistakes remaining from the misunderstandings among the characters in the first part of the novel. While Nelly establishes and consolidates her position with the novel's new heroine, Isabella appears as a temporary narrator who transmits to Nelly in detail the history of her short-lived marriage to Heathcliff. Isabella thereby fills a gap in the narrative and completes the account of Heathcliff after he has disappeared from the visual range of Nelly, the regular narrator. Isabella's appearance as temporary narrator is additionally important in that it results from her function as bridge between the two parts of *Wuthering Heights*. With the death of Catherine and before the beginning of the new plot related to the figure of Cathy, a "dead space" remains in terms of the development of the action in the novel. Isabella's story fills the intermediary realm with the bizarre account of her marriage with Heathcliff. Isabella's unreliable point of view is clear from the outset on account of her harsh disappointment with Heathcliff and his relationship to her. The satanic description of Heathcliff presented by Isabella merely reinforces Nelly's misconception of his personality in the second part of the work. Nelly, who for reasons already discussed wants to keep Cathy for herself, regards Heathcliff with increasing suspicion as one who would like to "steal" Cathy from her. Heathcliff is the primary stimulus for Nelly as narrator involving herself progressively more and more in the plot, and she occupies erroneous positions out of her limited and suspicious approach toward him. Isabella's personal hatred for Heathcliff thus intensifies Nelly's deep animosity toward him, just as Isabella's manifestly subjective point of view anticipates Nelly's unreliable perspective as the novel approaches its conclusion.

In the second part, Nelly acts to preserve Cathy for herself on the pretext that her father has forbidden her to associate with the “evil” people along the way to Penistone Crag. Although Cathy encounters Hareton once she arrives at Wuthering Heights, Nelly hides this fact from Edgar. She does this not out of a desire to protect her imagined daughter from the wrath of her father but because she is concerned about Edgar’s negligent care of Cathy. Nelly’s unacknowledged desire to win Cathy’s love thereby intermittently comes into conflict with her clear economic dependence on Cathy’s father. Nelly’s renewed attempt to attain the status of real heroine in her story is shattered by the rigid class system which she is unable to overcome. The unintended intersection of motives and actions, attitudes and consequences, causes her story to elude the degree of reliability with which she is at great pains to endow it. The more that Nelly attempts, without success, to become involved in the adventures of her heroes, the more these heroes push her with greater strength from their narrow circle.

Even Lockwood, who, as mentioned, appears toward the final and decisive stage of the plot, does not succeed in involving himself in the novel’s action. And this is because of his inability to understand the significance of the important occurrences which unfold before his eyes—at times because of Nelly’s unreliable account and at times because of his tendencies toward melodramatic and distorted explanations of real events. The two unreliable narrators of the frame story thus reconstruct the “reality” in the action of the novel in terms of their own peculiar points of view. Thus, interpretation of reality is left up to the reader, who cannot rely on the convenience of a homogeneous and dependable point of view. Instead, the reader is constantly involved in a difficult search after the true meaning of the events in *Wuthering Heights*.

The simplistic perspectives of Nelly and Lockwood fashion the novel’s figures in terms of naïve notions or shallow, melodramatic interpretations. These result from their subjective and limited positions which do not change during the course of the narrative. Nelly’s view of the characters’ motivations and her grasp of the significance of their actions are therefore mistaken, just as Lockwood, so absorbed by them, ludicrously misreads the protagonists’ personalities in terms of a sentimental superficiality. In her story, Nelly misrepresents the figure of Heathcliff when she describes him

as an unscrupulous villain, and she does not penetrate to the depths of her characters when she describes Catherine as essentially an aggressive and unruly figure. Likewise, she exaggerates in the opposite direction in her favorable description of Edgar and generally improves on him—just as she at times shuts her eyes to Cathy's failings—out of her determined desire to create a real bond with characters who ignore her autonomous existence. Lockwood, on the other hand, in the beginning boasts of Cathy's romantic charms, worships Heathcliff's somber personality, and has definite misgivings about what he considers Hareton's offensive character. His sentimental foolishness induces him to enter an imagined world of stormy melodrama which insulates him forever from genuine understanding of the characters.

The account provided by the two unreliable narrators, fraught with misunderstanding of the spirit of the protagonists and the meaning of their actions, impedes a sentimental identification on the part of the reader with the characters and events of the narrative. However, it cannot restrain the enterprising reader from examining over and over again the true significance of the characters' actions and the explanations for their curious relationships. Ultimately, the interposed framework of a pair of unreliable narrators can only, paradoxically, augment for us the inner story's credibility.