



Characters

Task 20

Working with Punter's ideas of Gothic stereotypes, explain which character(s) seems to fit each stereotype, and the extent to which they do so.

Task 21

From memory, draw up a quick sketch of each of the main characters. At a later stage these character sketches can and should be developed. Consider:

- why have they been included
- how they connect to the themes and concerns of the novel as a whole
- how they relate to those around them
- how they use language and how they act
- how others act towards them and speak about them

Gothic stereotypes

In the following passage from his book *The Literature of Terror*, David Punter writes on the stereotypical characters of Gothic novels:

[Gothic fiction] was peopled with stock characters, who discoursed in predictable ways: the shy, nervous, retiring heroine, who was nevertheless usually possessed of a remarkable ability to survive hideously dangerous situations; the heavy-handed, tyrannical father; the cast of comic extras and servants who, like many of the other characters, often seem to be lifted wholesale out of Jacobean drama; and above all the villain. The villain was always the most complex and interesting character in gothic fiction, even when drawn with a clumsy hand: awe-inspiring, endlessly resourceful in pursuit of his often opaquely evil ends, and yet possessed of a mysterious attractiveness, he stalks from the pages of one gothic novel to another, manipulating the doom of others while the knowledge of his own eventual fate surrounds him like the monastic habit and cowl which he so often wore. (Punter, 1996)

Brontë's women

None of Brontë's women is conventionally shy and retiring. Cathy, Catherine and Isabella are all strong and forthright women. They are not passive in the face of danger, but react, often with considerable power, to defend themselves, frequently provoking worse danger in so doing. Isabella comes the closest to Punter's stereotype, fleeing the wrath of Heathcliff and the disapproval of her brother, Edgar, to live out her life in exile in the south. However, she does not do this without having faced life-threatening brutality at the hands of Heathcliff.

Cathy and Catherine are still less stereotypical. Neither can be considered in any sense weak. Cathy is in many ways the driving force behind Heathcliff's brutal villainy, and as such is part villain herself. Catherine stoically endures Heathcliff's brutality, and is brutalised herself until she finds salvation in her relationship with Hareton towards the end of the novel.

Heathcliff

Heathcliff dominates the novel. He is a man of a thousand contradictions: a beast, a victim, cruel, capable of the deepest love, a baby, a child, a man, heartless, hateful, affectionate, confident, in need of reassurance, a gentleman, sub-human, superhuman, a Byronic hero, a Machiavellian villain, vengeful and forgiving. Our perception of him shifts continually, and no simple summary of our feelings is possible; however, broadly speaking, our sorrow for him at the beginning becomes dislike as the novel progresses, and returns to sympathy as the novel concludes.

He is an unprincipled and tyrannical villain. An awe-inspiring man, he evokes absolute fear in most of the other characters. Adept at manipulating the fate of those around him, he turns their lives and property to his own purposes and takes villainous glee in the pain he inflicts. He works to master his own fate — especially his long-desired reunion with his beloved Cathy. He has the dash, fire, mystery and complex attraction of the Byronic hero. We never quite understand him. What are his true roots? Where did he go and what did he do during his absence from the neighbourhood of the Heights and the Grange? We also sympathise with him; an outsider from the moment he arrives in Yorkshire, he is never accepted and is frequently maltreated by those who should care for him. Forever reminded of his dubious birth, background and social status, he is forced into a corner where he has no choice but to defend himself ferociously. Heathcliff is a victim as well as a villain.

Examples and analysis

1 ...Mr Heathcliff forms a singular contrast...country squire... (p. 5)

Heathcliff is a man of uncertain, unacceptable parentage, a social misfit (note the derogatory 'gypsy'). To Lockwood he is 'under-bred' and contradictory — a gypsy-gentleman, providing 'a singular contrast to his abode'.

2 Heathcliff stood near the entrance...hardly pick it up. (p. 26)

Heathcliff displays unexpected vulnerability. Note his extreme emotion.

3 [Hindley's] treatment of [Heathcliff]...was enough...sullen savageness and ferocity. (p. 66)

Heathcliff is a victim, but evil nonetheless. Note his savage, vengeful pleasure in Hindley's degradation.



Laurence Olivier as Heathcliff when older in the 1939 film version



Pause for Thought



As the novel progresses, how does Brontë demonstrate how little Heathcliff has actually changed?

Taking it Further



Read the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Matthew 18, verses 12–14 and/or Luke 15, verses 3–7); also Jesus's warning against wolves in sheep's clothing in Matthew 7, verse 15 at www.biblegateway.com/. What do these passages add to your understanding of Heathcliff's character at this point and in the novel more generally?

4 A half-civilized ferocity...too stern for grace. (p. 96)

Upon his return to Yorkshire, Heathcliff has changed. He has come into unexplained wealth. Uncertainty and mystery multiplies. Nobody knows where he has been and he is now a fine, handsome figure of a man, superior in many ways to Mr Linton. However, he retains his passion, brutality and fire. His eyes tell the tale, and now he is a fearsome and powerful force.

5 'He is reformed...enemies all round!' (p. 99)

The qualifying 'apparently' alerts us that looks can be deceiving. Heathcliff's violent passions are subdued to prepare a foundation for his longer-term plans.

6 'Tell her what Heathcliff is...a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man.' (p. 102)

Isabella has romantically idealised views of Heathcliff. The wild natural world reflects Heathcliff's psychology.

7 I felt that God...spring and destroy. (p. 107)

Heathcliff is portrayed as either a sheep under threat or as a satanic beast. This adds to our ambiguous sense of him.

8 'Your presence is a moral poison that would contaminate the most virtuous...' (p. 114)

Heathcliff contaminates the lives of everyone around him. Violence and brutality spread like a plague about him. Remember, however, that Heathcliff has (at least to some extent) caught this disease from the treatment he receives at the hands of Cathy, Hindley and the rest of the Earnshaws.

9 'She abandoned them...my chivalrous devotion.' (p. 149)

Heathcliff speaks of Isabella's erroneous views, and in doing so identifies what he is not.

10 'Don't put faith...not a human being!' (pp. 150–51)

Isabella recognises Heathcliff's untrustworthy, monstrous nature.

11 'I have no pity!...the increase of pain.' (p. 151)

Heathcliff identifies his own pitiless nature; consuming anger and cruelty resulting from his pain.

12 'Poor wretch!' I thought; 'you have a heart and nerves the same as your brother men!' (p. 168)

Nelly is sympathetic. She understands Heathcliff is at war with himself and the world. He is vulnerable and susceptible to normal human emotions.

Pause for Thought



Do you think Heathcliff is more of a sadist (one who enjoys inflicting pain on others) or a masochist (one who enjoys having pain inflicted upon himself)?

13 ‘...the casement behind me...gleamed through the dark.’
(p. 178)

This is Heathcliff at his most animal-like; a cannibal seeking to devour his victim. He displays superhuman strength and ‘blights’ (infects) the air of the house by his very presence.

14 ‘...his basilisk eyes...presence of such grief. (p. 180)

Serpentine darkness is counterbalanced with deep grief within the ‘basilisk’ stare.

15 ‘I don’t care for striking...destroy for nothing.’ (p. 323)

Heathcliff is surprisingly lethargic and apathetic after all his violent, irrepressible energy. This change makes way for the triumph of love over hate, of rebuilding over destruction, of looking to the future instead of brooding on the past.

16 ...from childhood...as sound as mine. (p. 324)

Heathcliff’s dark thoughts are emphasised here, providing an obvious link to the supernatural.

17 ‘...as to repenting of my injustices...does not satisfy itself.’
(p. 333)

Heathcliff dies unrepentant, and does not fully understand himself. He is far from conventional Christian belief, but his desire for eternal relationship with Cathy illustrates his profoundly spiritual nature.

Cathy

The following quotations all shed light on the character of Cathy.

1 Certainly, she had ways...you might comfort her. (p. 42)

Cathy is emotionally volatile, passionate, and profoundly dedicated to Heathcliff. She is deeply selfish, always desiring attention. Wild and wicked with a cruel streak, she manipulates others. She is mischievous and annoys others, but is also beautiful, as befits her role as heroine.

2 In the place where she heard...neither credit, nor praise. (p. 67)

Cathy is duplicitous. Her relationship with Heathcliff is ambiguous. They share an ‘unruly nature’.

3 ...she seemed to allow...sympathy for her feelings.

Cathy is wild and uncontrollable — especially in regard to Heathcliff.

4 ‘...remind him of my passionate temper...more anxious about me!’ (p. 117)

Cathy has a vengeful and controlling nature. She manipulates both Edgar and Nelly, and is unstable almost to the point of insanity. Her demands for sympathy show how self-centred she can be.

Pause for Thought



Look at representations of Heathcliff in a variety of film and stage versions of the novel. How effectively do you feel they illustrate the complexities of his character?

Task 22

Using the information about Heathcliff and other ideas of your own, write a one-page summary of your own view of Heathcliff’s character.



5 It was enough...crash them to splinters! (p. 118)

Cathy will go to any lengths to manipulate Edgar and Nelly. Her frenzy makes us question her sanity.

6 Tossing about...I would open the window. (p. 122)

Is Cathy's madness affected or genuine? Many things in the novel border on the insane. Cathy's behaviour reflects this and is one of the many examples of liminality in the novel.

7 The flash of her eyes...out of this world... (p. 158)

Cathy's fire and passion are replaced by an aura of other-worldliness. Sudden emotional shifts show that she is no longer part of the rational world. She has a strange and unearthly beauty.

Other characters

Nelly Dean

Nelly Dean is a dedicated family servant. She repeatedly inhabits the middle ground between warring factions, but bravely refuses to accept the status quo despite suffering for it both emotionally and physically. She is the primary narrator of the tale, and provides us with an overview of the complex unfolding events, offering a rationalising commentary. She has clearly been deeply affected and scarred by what has taken place at Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights, having watched the steady disintegration and resurrection of the Earnshaw and Linton families over a long period of time.

She is the repository of all the characters' secrets. Cathy and Heathcliff both confide in her and she bears their emotional baggage. She is repeatedly put in impossible positions, frequently finding herself imprisoned (sometimes literally) within her divided loyalties. Her common-sense, no-nonsense viewpoint counterbalances the excesses and passions of the main characters and roots the novel in reality.

Lockwood

Lockwood is an outsider in the rugged Yorkshire world. An interloper from the south, he is well-spoken, and at times comes across as rather vain and pompous. Lockwood is not described for us physically, but tells us he knows through experience that he is a reasonably attractive man. That said, we gather that he has been unsuccessful in love. This is, perhaps, the result of a rather introverted nature which may suggest he is cold and uncaring. He is a man 'of the busy world', and finds life at the Grange rather restrictive. He is also refined and bookish, and

Nelly Dean...is the repository of all the characters' secrets

feels out of place in the harsh world of the Heights and the brutality of existence there.

As the frame narrator, Lockwood is at once a part of Brontë's story (he meets several of the characters in person and encounters the ghost of Cathy in his nightmare) but also distanced from it. He is in many ways in the same position as us — an outsider who hears the tale through the synthesising voice of Nelly Dean. He shares our confusion, shock and outrage, distanced as he is from the happenings of Nelly's tale. He also serves as a foil to Heathcliff. A real gentleman — a man of manners and refinement — he contrasts with Heathcliff who, while a gentleman by social position, never attains the demeanour of a true gentleman.

Hindley

Hindley is a desperate, reckless, tyrannical, greedy, lonely, vengeful, bullying, evil and frequently drunken man. After his wife's death, Hindley's character becomes suddenly much darker and he falls in with a bad crowd. Cathy says: 'Hindley is too reckless to select his acquaintance prudently' (p. 99). He also becomes increasingly driven by greed: 'doubtless my brother's covetousness will prompt him to accept the terms [of Heathcliff's return to the Grange]' (p. 99), but is also profligate — 'though what he grasps with one hand, he flings away with the other' (p. 100).

Linton

Linton is a weak, pathetic character. He shamelessly uses his physical condition to manipulate others. In spite of this, however, Brontë creates some sympathy for him. Linton is bullied mercilessly by his father and used, through marriage to Catherine, as a means of winning Thrushcross Grange. Linton is helpless against Heathcliff, according to whom he is a 'whelp' and 'tin polished to ape a service of silver'. Nelly describes him as a 'selfish and disagreeable' young man and calls him 'an indulged plague of a child', perverse and unnatural.

Catherine

Catherine is in many ways very similar to Cathy. She is a beautiful young woman, 'high-spirited, but not rough'. She is sensitive and lively, with the 'capacity for intense attractions'. This latter characteristic proves to be both her undoing and her salvation; it initially, through Linton, leaves her open to Heathcliff's greedy machinations. She is radically changed by Heathcliff, turning into the harridan we see at the Heights. In her relationship with Hareton, however, she finds a suitable companion and a fruitful outlet for the loving side of her character.



Hareton

Hareton is a fearless and resilient young man. Brutalised by Heathcliff as revenge on Hindley, he is illiterate and unable to express himself. His anger and frustration often overflows into physical violence. Although he maltreats him, Heathcliff recognises Hareton's fundamentally good and noble nature. He describes him as 'gold put to the use of paving stones', unlike Linton who is 'tin polished to ape a service of silver'. This prepares us for the changes that occur when he develops his relationship with Catherine. Nelly sums up these changes:

His honest, warm, and intelligent nature shook off rapidly the clouds of ignorance and degradation in which it had been bred; and Catherine's sincere commendations acted as a spur to his industry. His brightening mind brightened his features, and added spirit and nobility to their aspect — I could hardly fancy it the same individual... (p. 322)

Isabella

Isabella is perhaps the weakest of Brontë's women, although she arguably suffers the most at the hands of Heathcliff. She proves naïve and headstrong, wilfully marrying Heathcliff against the advice of Nelly, Cathy and Edgar. She has a romantic (and Romantic) view of life, which leads her into self-deluding fantasies. Her choices leave her a shattered and maltreated woman, abandoned by both husband and brother, and profoundly isolated.

Joseph

Joseph is a cruel, cold-hearted, religious hypocrite, and Heathcliff's faithful servant.

Zillah

Zillah is another loyal servant at the Heights; quieter and less apparently cruel than Joseph, she nevertheless does nothing to try to help the victims of Heathcliff's barbarity.