

## Victorian Gothicism

*Catherine, who married Edgar Linton, has fallen ill. In her fevered visions, she remembers her childhood with Heathcliff, with whom she had fallen in love as a child, on the moors surrounding Wuthering Heights, the house where he lived.*

Tossing about, she increased her feverish bewilderment to madness, and tore the pillow with her teeth; then raising herself up all burning, desired that I would open the window. We were in the middle of winter, the wind blew strong from the north-east, and I objected. Both the expressions flitting over her face, and the changes of her moods, began to alarm me terribly; and brought to my recollection her former illness<sup>1</sup>, and the doctor's injunction that she should not be crossed. A minute previously she was violent; now, supported on one arm, and not noticing my refusal to obey her, she seemed to find childish diversion in pulling the feathers from the rents she had just made, and ranging them on the sheet according to their different species: her mind had strayed to other associations.

**Commentaire [PC1]:** Symbolism of the window is manifold: at the most basic level, a window joins and separated two worlds; imagination (window left ajar as symbol of dreams in Gothic novels, space for the unconscious to slip through), expression of scopie drive (looking out the window), social symbol of wealth (associated with light), screen between the conscious and the unconscious, separation between the self and the other...

**Commentaire [PC2]:** moodscapes

**Commentaire [PC3]:** violence

**Commentaire [PC4]:** symbolic representation of C herself

**Commentaire [PC5]:** Confusion: past/present

‘That’s a turkey’s,’ she murmured to herself; ‘and this is a wild duck’s; and this is a pigeon’s. Ah, they put pigeons’ feathers in the pillows—no wonder I couldn’t die! Let me take care to throw it on the floor when I lie down. And here is a moor-cock’s; and this—I should know it among a thousand—it’s a lapwing’s. Bonny bird; wheeling over our heads in the middle of the moor. It wanted to get to its nest, for the clouds had touched the swells, and it felt rain coming. This feather was picked up from the heath, the bird was not shot: we saw its nest in the winter, full of little skeletons. Heathcliff set a trap over it, and the old ones dared not come. I made him promise he’d never shoot a lapwing after that, and he didn’t. Yes, here are more! Did he shoot my lapwings, Nelly? Are they red, any of them? Let me look.’

‘Give over with that baby-work!’ I interrupted, dragging the pillow away, and turning the holes towards the mattress, for she was removing its contents by handfuls. ‘Lie down and shut your eyes: you’re wandering. There’s a mess! The down is flying about like snow.’

I went here and there collecting it.

‘I see in you, Nelly,’ she continued dreamily, ‘an aged woman: you have grey hair and bent shoulders. This bed is the fairy cave under Penistone Crags, and you are gathering elf-bolts<sup>2</sup> to hurt our heifers; pretending, while I am near, that they are only locks of wool. That’s what you’ll come to fifty years hence: I know you are not so now. I’m not wandering: you’re mistaken, or else I should believe you really were that withered hag, and I should think I was under Penistone Crags; and I’m conscious it’s night, and there are two candles on the table making the black press shine like jet.’

**Commentaire [PC6]:** Future / Catherine waxes prophetic

‘The black press? where is that?’ I asked. ‘You are talking in your sleep!’

‘It’s against the wall, as it always is,’ she replied. ‘It does appear odd—I see a face in it!’

‘There’s no press in the room, and never was,’ said I, resuming my seat, and looping up the curtain that I might watch her.

**Commentaire [PC7]:** Negative forms  
→ Nelly = reality, denial of Catherine’s madness  
+ senses : sight (watch, l. 30) vs vision

‘Don’t you see that face?’ she inquired, gazing earnestly at the mirror.

And say what I could, I was incapable of making her comprehend it to be her own; so I rose and covered it with a shawl.

35 ‘It’s behind there still!’ she pursued, anxiously. ‘And it stirred. **Who is it?** I hope it will not come out when you are gone! Oh! Nelly, the room is haunted! I’m afraid of being alone!’

I took her hand in mine, and bid her be composed; for **a succession of shudders convulsed her frame**, and she would keep straining her gaze towards the glass.

‘There’s **nobody** here!’ I insisted. ‘It was *yourself*, Mrs. Linton: you knew it a while since.’

40 ‘Myself?’ she gasped, ‘and **the clock is striking twelve!** It’s true, then! that’s dreadful!’

Her fingers clutched the clothes, and gathered them over her eyes. I attempted to steal to the door with an intention of calling her husband; but I was summoned back by a piercing shriek—the shawl had dropped from the frame.

45 ‘Why, what is the matter?’ cried I. ‘Who is coward now? **Wake up!** That is **the glass—the mirror**, Mrs. Linton; and you see yourself in it, and **there** am I too by your side.’

Trembling and bewildered, she held me fast, but the **horror** gradually passed from her countenance; **its paleness gave place to a glow** of shame.

50 ‘Oh, dear! **I thought I was at home,**’ she sighed. ‘I thought I was lying in my chamber at Wuthering Heights<sup>4</sup>. Because I’m weak, my brain got **confused**, and I screamed **unconsciously**. Don’t say anything; but stay with me. **I dread sleeping: my dreams appal me!**’

‘A sound sleep would do you good, ma’am,’ I answered: ‘and I hope this suffering will prevent your trying starving again.’

55 ‘Oh, **if I were but in my own bed in the old house!**’ she went on bitterly, wringing her hands. ‘And **that wind sounding in the firs by the lattice**. Do let me feel it—it comes straight down the **moor**—do let me have one **breath!**’ To pacify her I held the casement ajar a few seconds. **A cold blast rushed through;** I closed it, and returned to my post. She lay still now, her face bathed in tears. **Exhaustion of body had entirely subdued her spirit: our fiery Catherine was no better than a wailing child.**

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (1847)

**Commentaire [PC8]:** deictic = presence (vs dream)

**Commentaire [PC9]:** colours

**Commentaire [PC10]:** Moor/wind = life (see reporting verbs: gasp, sigh → whole experience leaves her breathless)

**Commentaire [PC11]:** violence

**Commentaire [PC12]:** see l. 6

### **Structure**

Blending narrative and dialogue, the text falls into three parts\*:

First, from line 1 to line 20, Nelly's account of Catherine's growing fever and the latter's subsequent soliloquy mirrors the rising tension on which the extract opens. The first part of the extract hinges on the widening gap between the present situation, that of a feverish Catherine lying in bed and picking up the feathers from her pillow, and Catherine's dream-like state, during which she associates various bird species with her past experiences on the moors surrounding Wuthering Heights. The first four paragraphs in the extract are couched in symbolism: the wintery weather clashes with the heat of Catherine's fever – and repressed desire for Heathcliff – while the evocation of death in her delirious digression may be said to re-enact the loss of her childish innocence.

Second, from line 21 to line 45, the tension builds up to a Gothic climax, during which Catherine's madness leads from sight to vision as she waxes prophetic and describes Nelly's future witch-like state. Although her monologue about the bird feathers was still rooted in experience, she now fails to distinguish reality from delirious illusion. The rhythm quickens as the dialogue becomes brisker and brisker and betrays an apparent lack of communication between the two characters. The climactic tipping point is reached when, seeing her face in the mirror, Catherine is frightened by her doppelgänger-like reflection and screams, just as her fear seems to be contaminating an increasingly anxious Nelly.

Last, from line 46 to 56, Catherine wakes up in tears, wishing she were back at Wuthering Heights. Nelly has now become a mother-like figure whose emotional support Catherine relies on to assuage her pain, confirming her liminal status in the passage: originally a profoundly negative figure who denies Catherine her wishes, she now gives in and indulges her whims. The framing effect brought on by the twin mention of the wind and Catherine's child-like mien actually conceals the sea change Catherine has undergone in the course of the extract: she has been deprived of her initial energy as a result of her understanding that the past cannot be brought back to life and that she has lost her innocence for good. Feeling the wind from the heath paradoxically makes her understand that her experience of the freedom and masculine energies of the moor is impossible now that she is married to Mr Linton.

[Other elements that could have been included, depending on your argument: mise en abyme, Nelly liminal = both past and present; enclosure/imprisonment, Nelly's subjective, internal pov]

### **Key Question / Thesis Statement**

Ex. 1: The following question may thus be raised: to what extent does the depiction of Catherine's fit of madness by the dramatized narrator help question the stability of female identity to delve into the socio-cultural implications of her life as a married woman?

Ex. 2: Bearing in mind the subjective treatment of Catherine's fit of madness by Nelly, the dramatized narrator, I will study how the expression of Catherine's repressed desire for Heathcliff entails a diffraction of the isolated female self which amounts to a (post-)Romantic subversion of Victorian domesticity.

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\* Autres façons de présenter la structure : *the text can be divided into three parts / the text can be broken down into three parts / the three-pronged structure of the extract can be broken down as follows...*

## Outline

### Possible Lead-in: Women and Speech in the Elizabethan Era

The Elizabethans had a very precise and very strict idea of the perfect woman, and all the treatises on this subject insist on the qualities expected of a woman's voice: it had to be soft, decorous and modest. In fact, the perfect woman was a silent one – silence was thought to be the best expression of a woman's modesty. A loud voice, disrespectful of one's elders or of the male voice – Elizabethan England was a patriarchal society – was not merely rude, it also suggested sexual immodesty.

British critic Laurie Maguire even notes that, in the Elizabethan era, misogynist metonymy associated the open mouth with the open vagina, the logic being that a woman who opens one orifice—her mouth—will open another. Therefore, a woman who can command an audience with her voice, her words, or her songs is bound to be seen as a whore.

Example: Ophelia in *Hamlet* or Desdemona in *Othello*.

## 1. Madness and Desire

### a. Catherine's Climactic Fever

Madness as worsening disease (cf. opening words "increased", l. 2), associated with:

- beast-like violence (= deprived of her humanity by the disease she suffers from, cf. doctor's advice, l. 5 = she might be dangerous)
- confusion: "mess" l. 19 in the room as objective correlative of Catherine's state of mind

⇒ Climactic structure of the passage, with sudden abatement at the end (narrative summary, l. 45-6)

Echoes the dramatic presentation of the growing fever at the beginning (l. 5-7) and the growing melodramatic treatment of emotion in the passage (+ movement, changing moods)

Framing effect: Nelly ascertains Catherine's medical state and describes her as a child twice (l. 6 & 56)

### b. Child-like Regression

This apparently cyclical structure hides change undergone by Catherine

- Beginning of the passage: Nelly as negative figure, contradicting Catherine at every turn, becoming the voice of reasonableness and trying to restore order (l. 20)
- By the end of the passage, Nelly may in fact have become a mother-like figure (cf. "our fiery Catherine": first person plural traditionally used in narratives [cf. "our protagonist"], but also sign of close association) who is reassuring (l. 36, 48-49 & 54) and cares for her well-being (cf. l. 50-51)

⇒ Catherine: unruly child → "wailing child" deprived of her energy

### c. Loss of Innocence

Energy associated in the concluding lines with image of fire ("our fiery Catherine", l. 56)

As her fever abates, she also loses another quality associated with words "burning" (l. 2) and "glow of shame" (l. 46); both expression of desire (cf. telling sequence in l. 2: "burning, desired"), encapsulated at the end of the passage (l. 53)

⇒ Madness as manifestation of her pining for her past life at WH, which she associates with Heathcliff (l. 14-15)

Ambiguous, though: lapwing as symbolic of Catherine's purity when young ("bonny bird" → cf. set phrase "bonny lass" = beautiful girl), killed by Heathcliff

⇒ Red → evocation of death, loss of purity (cf. Nelly's comparing the feathers to snow), but also loss of virginity (broken hymen) especially as it's associated with the torn pillow and the setting (bedchamber)

⇒ Fit of madness as re-enactment of Catherine's symbolic loss of innocence as she became aware of her all-consuming (though possibly "unconsciou[s]", l. 48) desire for Heathcliff, her childhood love interest; caught in the dream world, increasingly incompatible the reality Nelly clings to

## II. Split Identities

### a. The Past, the Present and the Future

Analysis of tenses and time adverbials helps identify three different temporal frameworks:

- Past in lines 11-16 (see use of preterit)
- Future in lines 21-24 (see "fifty years hence", l. 23 vs "now", l. 24)
- Present in the rest of the text (distorted though it may be: the past is seeping into the present with the reference to the "black press" in l. 25)

Confusion what was/what is/what will be, especially as her fever grows: transition from sight and presence (gradated deictics "that", "this", "here" in the bird speech, l. 9-11) to vision ("I see", l. 21) and absence (l. 24-25 + Nelly's reaction in l. 29 and 39, w/ negative forms)

⇒ distorted sense of the here and now / *hic et nunc* (italicized verbs in l. 24-25)

Linguistic diffraction of the self (cf. need for use of reflexive pronouns, l. 38-39)

Builds up to a sense of self-alienation "I dread sleeping: my dreams appal me."

cf. famous passage where Catherine tells Nelly "I *am* Heathcliff" (chap. 9), pb being that novel retraces the tragic impossibility they face, as they can only be reunited in death at the end of novel

### b. Gothic Liminality

Catherine's dual identity encapsulated by the Gothic climax: the appearance of her face in the mirror, with her inability to recognize herself = symbolic of the separation between past Catherine and present Catherine

⇒ Separation b/w her conscious mind (l. 25) and her unconscious mind (l. 48) (cf. symbolism of the window), in other words: Gothic as literary representation of the unconscious (cf. psychological Gothic in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century)

Like many Gothic-inspired texts, scene characterized by liminality and uncanny atmosphere: midnight, obscurity, irruption of the ominous dream into reality, Nelly's witch-like appearance...

Focalization: Nelly as dramatized narrator, associated with subjective and necessarily partial point of view → questioning Catherine's visions, casting doubt on supernatural occurrences

⇒ Separation within Catherine leads to a separation b/w the two characters

### c. Impossible Communication

Catherine and Nelly talking and acting at cross purposes:

- incompatible expressions of each character's will ("would", l. 2 & 37),
- so much so that their respective actions seem to cancel each other out, meaning that nothing is happening (e.g., Nelly's inability to call Mr Linton in lines 40-42 w/ antithetic structure)

Rejection of each other's linguistic take on the world (see questions: l. 27, 31, 43 as refusal of truthfulness of the other's statements)

+ Reporting verbs associated with Nelly's "refusal" (l. 6) to accept the validity of C's p.o.v. ("I objected", l. 3 & "I interrupted", l. 17 vs "she continued", l. 21)

⇒ Encapsulated by: "I was incapable of making her comprehend it to be her own" → *com-* + *prehendere* = hold together, verbally and intellectually) = no unity, sense of separation

⇒ sense of dissociation between Catherine's yearning for the wild energies of the moor and Nelly, the embodiment of domesticity in the passage = symbolic displacement (spatially and temporally) of Catherine's aspirations, which point to the moor rather than to her new home

### III. Romantic Aspirations

#### a. A Symbolically Ambiguous Moor

Moorland setting = wild place associated with death or at least harsh living conditions ("middle of winter", l. 2 + "wind", l. 3 + "cold blast", l. 54)

But impression that it is also a land of plenty (cf. various birds) + poetic undertones of Catherine's description ("for the clouds had touched the swells", iambic rhythm and poetic diction)

cf. Romantic birds: Wordsworth's cuckoo, Coleridge's nightingale and albatross, Keats's nightingale, Shelley's skylark → birds usually associated with imaginative flights in Romantic poetry

⇒ Heathcliff, embodiment of the moor (cf. masculinity: "moor-cock", Penistone Crag = rocky hill, somewhat phallic) = at once a source of desire (see 1<sup>st</sup> part) and fear (see l. 34-35, Heathcliff as source of Catherine's anguish)

Wind = dual symbolism, "breath of life" and inspiration (from the Latin *inspirare* → breathe upon, blow into; see references to "breath", l. 54 and "spirit", l. 56)

Only let in when Nelly accepts to open the window, but only brings more pain as the original experience of the moor cannot be re-enacted lastingly (⇒ cold = barrenness, Heathcliff's absence?)

#### b. Marital Enclosure

Limited effect of wind, but still contrasts with sense of imprisonment associated with the house at Thrushcross Grange (cf. closed window)

Looming authority of the husband (l. 40-41) + coffin-like "black press", domesticity but death + destruction of the pillow (marital bed) + refusal of meal (sharing / communion with other members of the household)

⇒ apparent attempt at destroying the elements associated w/ domesticity during her fit of madness

Her "home" is supposed to be at Thrushcross Grange, with her husband Mr Linton, but refuses to recognize it as such: she calls Wuthering Heights her "home" in l. 47 (as her fever abates, growing distance: see determiner + emotional distance with concrete noun instead of emotionally charged one in "the old house", l. 52)

**Commentaire [PC13]:** cf. chap 9:  
"Did it never strike you that if Heathcliff and I married, we should be beggars? whereas if I marry Linton, I can aid Heathcliff to rise and place him out of my brother's power."

cf. Contrast exemplified by the symbolism of the two houses: Wuthering Heights, though bare and sombre, symbolizes passion, energy, imagination. As for Thrushcross Grange, it stands for quietness and charm.

⇒ confrontation b/w domesticity and desire, rejection of the version of domesticity associated w/ Catherine's marriage to Mr Linton

c. Speech and Independence

Catherine as literary archetype of the "madwoman in the attic" → here, madness as representation of the psychosexual repression of Catherine by the domestic ideal of the Victorian era?

cf. Sandra Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 1979 → two traditional literary depictions of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century = either as angel or madwoman/monster

⇒ rejection of the Victorian archetype of the "Angel in the House" (Coventry Patmore, 1854) and of the Victorian ideal of domestic bliss, as Catherine's desires lie elsewhere

Catherine's verbal power < mise en abyme (narrative within the narrative) = Catherine as narrator, attempting to write her own story

⇒ representation of madness as possible way to assert her power within the context of an experience of domesticity associated with enclosure / a sense of imprisonment, but ends on Catherine's tragic surrendering to the inner domestic sphere and renouncing the outer imaginative world of the moor (cf. theory of the separate spheres)

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<sup>1</sup> In a previous episode, Catherine had suffered from a fit of delirium brought on by grief when she had learnt that Heathcliff had left Wuthering Heights.

<sup>2</sup> **elf-bolts**: flint arrowheads.

<sup>3</sup> **press**: a linen storage cupboard.

<sup>4</sup> **at Wuthering Heights**: traduire « à Hurlevent ».