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Wuthering Heights Structure
Lectures by

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Structural Symmetry and Thematic Inversion in *Wuthering Heights*

A Comparative Critical Analysis of the Novel's Beginning (Ch. 1–3) and End (Ch. 32–34)

Emily Brontë structures *Wuthering Heights* upon a architecture of strict structural symmetry and radical thematic inversion. Rather than following a linear narrative of moral progression, the novel forms an elliptical loop where the final three chapters (1802) systematically mirror, reverse, and resolve the trauma established in the opening three chapters (1801). By comparing the spatial dynamics, generational dynamics, window iconography, character trajectories, and narrative perspective across these two structural poles, this analysis demonstrates how Brontë replaces gothic violence and emotional confinement with domestic renewal, literacy, and spiritual transcendence.

1. Architectural and Environmental Dynamics: Enclosure vs. Openness

The opening chapters of *Wuthering Heights* establish an oppressive atmosphere characterized by climatic severity and physical obstruction. When Lockwood arrives at *Wuthering Heights* in November 1801, the setting is defined by winter blizzards, impenetrable darkness, and locked doors. The physical structure of the house acts as a fortress designed to exclude the outsider and incarcerate its inhabitants.

Contrastingly, Chapters 32 through 34 present a dramatic environmental shift to the spring and summer of 1802. The physical doors that were repeatedly bolted against Lockwood in Chapter 1 are literally and symbolically thrown wide open. The breeze from the moors flows freely through the interior spaces, signifying the dissolution of the claustrophobic hostility that previously governed the household.

The Metamorphosis of the Window Motif

The window of Catherine Earnshaw's former bedchamber functions as the novel's central threshold mechanism, illustrating the profound shift between the beginning and ending:

"I knocked the knuckles through the glass, and stretched an arm out to seize the spectre's hand; my fingers closed on the fingers of a little ice-cold hand! The intense horror of nightmare came over me... I pulled its wrist on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bedclothes..."

— **Lockwood's Nightmare, Chapter 3**

In Chapter 3, the window pane represents a violent, impenetrable barrier separating the living from the dead, and the exile from home. Catherine's child-ghost terrorizes Lockwood as she desperately scrapes against the glass, begging for entry ('Let me in!'). The image of blood soaking the bedclothes encapsulates the traumatic, unhealed wounds of the first generation.

By Chapter 34, the window motif undergoes a crucial structural inversion:

"The lattice, flapping to and fro, had let in the rain plentifully... his eyes met mine so keen and fierce, I started; and then he seemed to smile. With my hand I would have closed his eyes; to cover one open, would not be closed; they would not shut, they seemed to sneer at my attempt..."

— **Heathcliff's Death, Chapter 34**

When Nelly Dean discovers Heathcliff's corpse, he is lying in the very same closet bed, but the window lattice is unlatched and swinging open to the night rain. Where Catherine's ghost once sought entry from the outside, Heathcliff's spirit has broken outward into the expanse of the moors. The open window signals that the artificial divide between life and death, material confinement and spiritual freedom, has been permanently erased.

2. Generational Trajectories: Degradation vs. Educational Redemption

The structural polarity of the novel is most clearly visible in the condition of the second generation—Hareton Earnshaw and Cathy Linton. Brontë creates an explicit temporal mirror between Heathcliff's vengeful degradation of Hareton in 1801 and Cathy's transformative rehabilitation of Hareton in 1802.

In Chapter 2, Lockwood encounters a household defined by illiterate brutality and mutual disdain. Hareton is reduced to an uneducated, foul-mouthed farmhand—a direct execution of Heathcliff's vow to avenge Hindley's abuse by turning Hindley's son into a brute. Cathy Linton, widowed and stripped of her property, responds with bitter sarcasm and defensive spite.

However, in Chapter 32, literacy replaces violence as the primary social currency. Cathy's act of teaching Hareton to read represents a conscious undoing of Heathcliff's tyrannical system. Education acts as the mechanism of emotional and social restoration, breaking the intergenerational cycle of revenge that had fueled the plot since Heathcliff's arrival as a child.

"I get levers and mattocks to demolish the two houses, and train myself to be capable of working steel powers on as hard a scale... and when everything is ready and in my power, I find the will to lift a slate off either roof has vanished! My old enemies have not beaten me; now would be the precise time to revenge myself on their children... and I cannot strike!"

— **Heathcliff, Chapter 33**

Heathcliff's paralysis in Chapter 33 highlights the thematic triumph of the young lovers. He discovers that Hareton and Cathy's growing affection creates an inescapable visual and psychological reflection of his original unity with Catherine Earnshaw. Because their love neutralizes his malice, his revenge collapses not through external defeat, but through internal exhaustion and spiritual obsession.

3. Direct Comparative Matrix

The table below delineates the precise structural equivalences and inversions between the opening and closing movements of the text:

Narrative Dimension	Opening Movement (Ch. 1–3; 1801)	Closing Movement (Ch. 32–34; 1802)
Climatic & Spatial	Severe winter blizzard; locked doors;	Warm spring/summer sunshine; open doors and

Setting	oppressive, pitch-black interiors; domestic hostility.	windows; flowers planted; domestic warmth.
The Window Motif	Catherine's child-ghost bleeds on the broken pane, begging to enter ('Let me in!'). Barrier intact.	Heathcliff dies with the window unlatched, allowing his spirit to escape outward onto the moors.
Generational Dynamic	Hareton is deliberately kept illiterate; young Cathy is isolated, sharp-tongued, and resentful.	Cathy teaches Hareton to read; mutual respect and affection dismantle Heathcliff's revenge.
Heathcliff's State	Active, tyrannical, obsessed with earthly vengeance and legal/physical dominance.	Passive, refusing food, consumed entirely by his visionary reunion with Catherine; surrenders power.
Supernatural Haunting &	Terrorizing, intrusive, violent nightmares that disturb domestic safety (Lockwood's panic).	Naturalized presence; quiet spectral walking on the heath; serene peacefulness of the three graves.

4. Narrative Perspective and the Fate of the Outsider

The narrative frame provided by Lockwood undergoes a profound transformation from Chapter 1 to Chapter 34. In the opening chapters, Lockwood represents the arrogant urban outsider who consistently misreads the social dynamics of Wuthering Heights. He misinterprets Heathcliff's misanthropy as 'a capital

fellow's romantic solitude, and mistakes Hareton for a favored relative. His severe misjudgments culminate in his cowardly reaction to Catherine's ghost in Chapter 3. By Chapter 34, Lockwood returns as a humbled, superfluous observer. Upon witnessing the peaceful domesticity of Cathy and Hareton, he realizes that he has no place in their world. His departure leaves the narrative in the hands of the moors themselves. The famous concluding paragraph of the novel encapsulates the ultimate stillness that replaces the initial storm:

"I lingered round them, under that benign sky: watched the moths fluttering among the heath and harebells, listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass, and wondered how anyone could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth."

— **Lockwood's Final Reflection, Chapter 34**

5. Conclusion: The Symmetrical Resolution

Emily Brontë's structural brilliance in *Wuthering Heights* lies in her ability to achieve resolution not by erasing past trauma, but by balancing it through rigorous formal symmetry. The terrifying isolation, violence, and supernatural dislocation of the beginning are systematically answered by the domestic harmony, literacy, and spiritual union of the end. By opening the windows and doors that were once locked tight, Brontë allows both the living and the dead to finally attain their rightful home.

Works Cited & Scholarly Context

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