

Wuthering Heights

Theme – Communication and Understanding

A theme is an issue or concern in the text which the writer is trying to explore. The theme is not the plot: don't confuse the two.

There can be several themes in a text besides the main one; it doesn't matter which one you pick as long as it is central to the texts you are studying.

When you are reading the text and thinking about this mode of comparison, ask yourself:

- How is the theme introduced? Is there a key moment that gives us an indication of the message the author is trying to explore? Does one of the central characters say or do something that sets us on the path of understanding the theme? Or is it conveyed by the minor characters or even the setting?
- How does the author develop this theme? Is it through a series of small events? Do we see situations developing that we know must lead to a crisis of some sort? How does the author interest us in the theme? Is it through a central character with whom we can empathise?
- Is there a moment of crisis or a turning point in the text? Does the central character have to make a difficult decision? Does the character do the right thing? How is this decision linked to the theme?
- How is the theme resolved? Are you very clear on the author's view of the ideas explored in the theme? Have we learned anything about human behaviour or society in general from the exploration of this theme?

Note – (K) symbol means 'Key Moment' in the text. It is important to use key moments to illustrate the points you are making in your answer.

We will be exploring the theme of **communication and understanding** in "Wuthering Heights."

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NOTE: The following is not written in essay form but rather is a series of points. This is for study purposes and is not meant to reflect the way in which you should structure your answer.

In "Wuthering Heights," we are presented with characters who seem - through ignorance, or lack of interest, or differing social backgrounds – to understand each other very poorly indeed. Indeed, the structure of the novel is centred on such misunderstandings, and it is up to Nelly Dean as narrator to try to make sense of it all for us.

(K) The theme of communication and understanding is introduced in the first chapter, when Mr. Lockwood tells of his visit to Wuthering Heights. Lockwood is a fussy, foppish city dweller with a poor grasp of his own nature and an even poorer grasp of the nature of his neighbour. Heathcliff, in contrast, is a "dark-skinned gypsy in aspect" and the very antithesis of everything for which Lockwood stands. They do not understand each other well at all; Lockwood believes he is like Heathcliff and Heathcliff has little or no interest in communicating with Lockwood, who he clearly regards as a weak, foolish man. Their conversation on the first page of the book emphasises the difference between the pair. Lockwood's speech shows us that he is civilised and well-educated but also pompous and pretentious. He uses words of Latin origin and speaks in an affected manner but does not

succeed in impressing his landlord. Indeed, his attempt to converse with Heathcliff is soon cut short by Heathcliff's impatient and aggressive manner.

" 'Mr. Heathcliff!' I said.

A nod was the answer.

'Mr. Lockwood, your new tenant, sir. I do myself the honour of calling on you as soon as possible after my arrival, to express the hope that I have not inconvenienced you by my perseverance in soliciting the occupation of Thrushcross Grange: I heard yesterday you had had some thoughts -'

'Thrushcross Grange is my own, sir,' he interrupted, wincing. 'I should not allow any one to inconvenience me, if I could hinder it – walk in!'

The 'walk in' was uttered with closed teeth and expressed the sentiment, 'Go to the deuce' ... I felt myself interested in a man who seemed more exaggeratedly reserved than myself."

Note the flowery language used by Lockwood in contrast to the abrupt, rude way in which Heathcliff expresses himself. Lockwood, although he recognises that Heathcliff is hardly welcoming, completely fails to understand the other's true nature and instead admires him for his reserve.

Lockwood uses language as a way of keeping others at a distance as he is not at all comfortable with outward shows of emotion (he uses Shakespeare's words when describing his love for a girl he met at the coast, for example – "never told my love"). He believes that Heathcliff's gruff manner and rough language simply hides a nature like his own, which shows how little he understands those around him. He says of Heathcliff, "I know, by instinct, his reserve springs from an aversion to showy displays of feeling." The problem is, of course, that Lockwood has little or no understanding of the workings of Heathcliff's mind and misinterprets his host's expressions of antagonism as a reserved manner which may well hide finer feelings. Nothing could be further from the truth.

On his second visit to Wuthering Heights, Lockwood fares no better and we see once again how uncommunicative the inhabitants of that house are. The misunderstandings are almost comic at times, but the overall effect of the surly, taciturn speech and the borderline hostility of Cathy, Hareton, Heathcliff and Joseph creates an atmosphere of tension and intrigue. Lockwood is clumsy and uncomfortable in a situation where nobody is willing to welcome him or to respond to his conversation in a civilised way. Lockwood, having lived in London

up until this point, proves unequal to the rough unfriendliness of those he meets in the Heights and his inability to communicate with them is shown to comic effect in the conversation between himself and Cathy in which he attempts to discuss pets with her. (K)

" 'A beautiful animal!' I commenced again. 'Do you intend parting with the little ones, madam?'

'They are not mine,' said the amiable hostess, more repellingly than Heathcliff himself could have replied.

'Ah, your favourites are among these?' I continued, turning to an obscure cushion full of something like cats.

'A strange choice of favourites!' she observed, scornfully.

Unluckily, it was a heap of dead rabbits."

Lockwood is bewildered by the behaviour of the people at the Heights and it is painfully obvious that nothing in his social life so far has equipped him to deal with such blatant hostility and such a disinterest in polite conversation.

It is obvious, even from these opening chapters that the characters neither communicate with nor understand each other on any sort of meaningful level and furthermore, it is clear that -with the exception of Lockwood - they do not even want to do so.

(K) At the end of chapter three, Lockwood says that as he walked back to Thrushcross Grange after his disturbed night in the Heights, he continually steered wrongly and had to be set on the right path by Heathcliff. This reflects Lockwood's difficulties in understanding the people he met in the Heights. In other words, Emily Brontë shows us how Lockwood's physical blundering through this unfamiliar world mirrors his social blunders as he tries, ineffectively, to establish a relationship with his neighbours. We wonder, as readers, what has lead to the inhabitants of the Heights being so clearly unhappy and at odds with one another. As they will not readily talk to Lockwood, he must find another means to explore their hatred for one another and their lack of willingness to talk to each other in anything but tones of the utmost dislike and anger. We, like Lockwood, want to understand these enigmatic individuals.

- How does the author develop this theme?

- Is it through a series of small events?
- Do we see situations developing that we know must lead to a crisis of some sort?
- How does the author interest us in the theme?
- Is it through a central character with whom we can empathise?

As Nelly Dean tells Lockwood the story of Wuthering Heights, we learn that the theme of communication and understanding is one which has played an important role in the lives of the central characters since Heathcliff and the present Catherine's mother were children.

(K) When Heathcliff is introduced into the Earnshaw household, Mr. Earnshaw seems neither to understand nor to care how this strange young boy might affect his family. He overrules their objections and insists that young Heathcliff was to be treated well. His lack of comprehension of the resentment engendered by such a pronouncement sets in motion a chain of events that will only end thirty one years later, when Heathcliff dies and Cathy and Hareton marry.

(K) Catherine and Hindley treat young Heathcliff abominably when he first arrives and yet he accepts their blows and insults stoically and seeming a "sullen, patient child." Heathcliff is an odd child in many ways but Mr. Earnshaw sees nothing wrong with his uncommunicative ways, and Nelly Dean tells Lockwood that the old man "took to Heathcliff strangely, believing all he said (for that matter, he said precious little, and generally the truth)..."

We wonder who, if anyone, really understands the newcomer, as everyone's judgement of him is different. To Mr. Earnshaw he is "a gift of God" while to Hindley he is an "imp of Satan." Once Nelly Dean has nursed Heathcliff through a dangerous illness, she views him as a "lamb." Does Heathcliff show anyone his true nature? We know he can manipulate Mr. Earnshaw and that he can even get his way with Hindley by threatening to tell his father of the older boy's bullying ways, but it is only in his growing friendship with Catherine that Heathcliff begins to communicate openly and honestly with another soul.

(K) In the years following Heathcliff's arrival, communication in the Earnshaw household breaks down even further. Mrs. Earnshaw dies and in the period before his own death, Mr. Earnshaw becomes increasingly religious and authoritarian, causing a great deal of tension between himself and Catherine. She is wayward and mischievous and although she tries to charm her way back into her father's good books, he tells her he cannot love her as she is so badly behaved. Nelly explains to Lockwood that "being repulsed continually hardened her."

A resentful Hindley is sent off to college and the young Heathcliff and Catherine are left to suffer Joseph's endless lectures and threats of hell-fire and brimstone. In his determination to see sin in everyone, Joseph becomes a positive tyrant to the youngsters and they escape his interminable Bible readings whenever they can. It seems that they are the only ones who understand one another and they grow ever closer when, after Mr. Earnshaw's death, Hindley returns and forces Heathcliff to become a mere servant in his own home.

(K) Catherine and Heathcliff's closeness is threatened by the introduction of the Lintons. When Catherine stays at Thrushcross Grange after being bitten by the dog, she finds, for the first time in her young life, peers with whom she can chat and play in a civilised way.

(K) Interestingly, it is at this stage in the book that Heathcliff briefly becomes a narrator when he tells Nelly what happened at the Grange. His passion and eloquence here are unlike the Heathcliff we have seen so far in the story and we realise that he is, when stirred, able to express himself exceptionally well.

The Lintons bring another dimension into Catherine's life but it is not one she can share with Heathcliff. He cannot talk to the Lintons as equals and they have no interest in hearing anything he has to say, regarding him as little more than a servant. Heathcliff tries to fit in by making himself "decent" but when Edgar makes fun of him, Heathcliff throws a bowl of hot apple sauce all over Edgar's head. Catherine feels caught between the two and throughout the book, continually fails to understand that they will never like one another. In her selfishness, Catherine believes that they should do as she says. In this, she displays a fundamental lack of understanding of Heathcliff and Edgar's natures and her attempts to get them to talk to each other in a friendly way when she is married to Edgar shows a remarkable lack of sensitivity.

As Edgar Linton pursues Catherine and as she distances herself from Heathcliff, we sense that a moment of reckoning is at hand.

- Is there a moment of crisis or a turning point in the text?
- Does the central character have to make a difficult decision?
- Does the character do the right thing?
- How is this decision linked to the theme?

Heathcliff and Edgar are now in competition for Catherine's love but it is becoming clear that she is leaning more towards the civilised, gentle, well-bred Edgar than towards the rough, crude Heathcliff. Their communication has almost ceased too; as Nelly tells us that "he had ceased to express his fondness for her in words, and recoiled with angry suspicion from her girlish caresses."

(K) Heathcliff's unwillingness to talk to Catherine has added to her displeasure with him and when he confronts her about the amount of time she spends with the Lintons, it is this sullen, taciturn side of Heathcliff's nature she blames for her changing affections.

"And should I always be sitting with you?" she demanded, growing more irritated. "What good do I get? What do you talk about? You might be dumb, or a baby for anything you say to amuse me.... It's no company at all, when people know nothing and say nothing."

Events in the story reach crisis point in chapter nine, when Heathcliff overhears part of Catherine's conversation with Nelly Dean. Edgar has proposed and Catherine is discussing the matter with Nelly. Nelly is an unwilling audience but Catherine proceeds with her reasons for accepting Edgar's proposal. What she does not realise is that Heathcliff is in a dark corner of the room, and can hear every word. Catherine tells Nelly that it would degrade her to marry Heathcliff now and he leaves without hearing the rest of her speech, in which she announces that she loves Heathcliff in a way she can never love Edgar. She claims that Heathcliff is "more myself than I am."

Catherine's love for Heathcliff is real but they communicate on a basic, natural level in many ways. They are like wild creatures, roaming the moors together. Edgar's civilised manner and easy, polite speech show Catherine that there is another way for men to behave and it shines a harsh light on Heathcliff's uncivilised nature. Catherine still loves him but, Heathcliff's increasingly sullen, uncommunicative moods drive a wedge between them in the time leading up to Edgar's proposal. The greatest misunderstanding of all occurs when Heathcliff hears part, but not all of Catherine's confession to Nelly Dean. The tragedy of the story is that Heathcliff and Catherine don't talk openly to each other at this stage and as a result of what he overhears, Heathcliff leaves Wuthering Heights and vanishes for several years. This miscommunication has tragic consequences for the entire Linton and Earnshaw families for the next twenty one years.

Heathcliff's reaction is extreme and his lust for vengeance seems to know no bounds. When he returns to Wuthering Heights to confront Catherine again, he is a different man, at least on the surface. He is wealthy and in appearance, a gentleman. In a twisted reflection of the

attraction Catherine felt for the polished, elegant Edgar Linton, Isabella Linton becomes hopelessly infatuated with Heathcliff. (K) Catherine tries to talk sense to her, realising that she does not understand Heathcliff's true nature at all, but to no avail. She tells Isabella that Heathcliff is not a rough diamond but "a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man," but still Isabella will not listen. Catherine says, "I hope I have misunderstood you, Isabella" when she hears that the girl adores Heathcliff but in fact it is Isabella who misunderstands. She misunderstands Heathcliff's nature and she thinks that Catherine's depiction of him as a dangerous, cruel man is motivated by jealousy. Yet again, the characters fail to understand each other and this leads to misery and suffering for all involved. Isabella elopes with Heathcliff and soon realises that Catherine was not lying when she described Heathcliff as someone who would "crush you like a sparrow's egg if he found you a troublesome charge."

Catherine's death in childbirth devastates Heathcliff and he begs her soul to haunt him and never stops hoping that she will communicate with him, even from beyond the grave. Nelly Dean is shocked by this, as she was shocked by Catherine's recounting of her dreams. Nelly is superstitious and her unwillingness or refusal to understand Catherine adds to the misunderstanding and lack of communication in "Wuthering Heights."

Heathcliff's plan for vengeance continues as he endeavours to make the lives of the next generation of Lintons and Earnshaws as miserable as possible. (K) He shows a clear understanding of Cathy's romantic nature when he dictates the letters for Linton to send to her. It is of course, ironic that he should now be so easily able to express himself in words, considering the accusations Catherine hurled at him before she married Edgar. Is he really communicating with Catherine when he tells Linton what to write? His love for her has never died and he never stops hoping that she will come to him, that she will make contact with him again.

Heathcliff has done all in his power to reduce Hindley's son, Hareton, to the level of a brute, and to treat him as badly as Hindley treated the young Heathcliff. In an ironic twist, Heathcliff finds that he understands and respects Hareton far more than he does his own son, Linton. Hareton also has a slavish devotion to Heathcliff and even Cathy cannot come between them.

We see a hope that with Hareton and Cathy's union there may come a new era of understanding and communication in Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. (K) At one stage, towards the end of the novel, Cathy criticises Heathcliff and when Hareton defends him, she shows a sensitivity that her mother would have been unlikely to show.

"The two new friends established themselves in the house during his absence; when I heard Hareton sternly check his cousin, on her offering a revelation of her father-in-law's conduct to his father. He said he wouldn't suffer a word to be uttered in his disparagement: if he were the devil, it didn't signify: he would stand by him; and he'd rather she would abuse himself, as she used to, than begin on Mr. Heathcliff. Catherine was waxing cross at this; but he found means to make her hold her tongue, by asking how she would like *him* to speak ill of her father? Then she comprehended that Earnshaw took the master's reputation home to himself; and was attached by ties stronger than reason could break – chains, forged by habit, which it would be cruel to attempt to loosen. She showed a good heart, thenceforth, in avoiding both complaints and expressions of antipathy concerning Heathcliff; and confessed to me her sorrow that she had endeavoured to raise a bad spirit between him and Hareton: indeed, I don't believe she has ever breathed a syllable, in the latter's hearing, against her oppressor since."

This selfless, thoughtful behaviour marks a new departure in the way the inhabitants of the Heights conduct themselves towards one another. The word "comprehended" is the key. Cathy and Hareton understand one another and their communication is considerate and measured in a way that Heathcliff and Catherine's never was. It may be argued that it is less passionate for that, but we feel certain that their relationship will be less tempestuous and far happier.