

Cultural Context or Social Setting in 'Wuthering Heights'

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

Cultural Context / Social Setting

The Cultural Context / Social Setting is the kind of world in which the story takes place.

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

- In what century or decade is the story set? Does the time matter? Could the story take place now or are things in our society very different?
- Where is the story set? Does the setting matter?
- Do we learn a lot about the social life of that place or time by reading the text?
- What are the protagonists' attitudes and values?
- Are there class distinctions?
- Are there race distinctions?
- Are there gender distinctions?
- Are children treated well?
- What are the manners and customs of that place/time?
- How does the daily life of the characters differ from life in the 21st century?
- Would you like to live in that time or place? Why? Why not?
- In what century or decade is the story set? Does the time matter? Could the story take place now or are things in our society very different?

"Wuthering Heights" opens in 1801 and covers the thirty years or so prior to that date as well. At that time, in England, the Industrial Revolution was under way and British society was beginning to change. When Emily Brontë wrote the book, in 1847, the effects of this change were being seen in the rise of the upwardly-aspiring middle class and the beginning of the shift from "old money" to "new money." A man could now raise his social standing by acquiring wealth – as Heathcliff does in "Wuthering Heights" – whereas in the past, one had to be born into an upper-class family in order to be considered a gentleman.

The novel also deals with the shift away from the old farming culture and the strict, patriarchal family life and towards a more urban way of life with an increase in equality for all. As a result of the Industrial Revolution, people were abandoning the countryside in droves and flocking to the cities in search of work and opportunities. Emily Brontë lived in the last days of this ancient, traditional, conservative way of rural life. Men still ruled their families and female relatives were subject to their authority. A woman's place was in the home and they were expected to be gentle and dutiful. The Brontë sisters published their books under pseudonyms, as female authors were not readily accepted. Emily's chosen name was "Ellis Bell."

The time in which "Wuthering Heights" is set does matter a great deal. If we look at the way in which women and children in particular are treated, we cannot imagine such things happening today or at least we cannot imagine them being condoned by society. However, though there may be some disapproval of Heathcliff or Hindley's behaviour towards the infant Hareton, for example, there is no attempt made to remove the young boy from their care.

The Cultural Context / Social Setting of "Wuthering Heights" shapes the lives of the characters to varying degrees. (K) Heathcliff's arrival at Wuthering Heights and his adoption into the Earnshaw family is a sign of the times in which the novel was set. (It is worth noting that around the time Emily Brontë was writing the novel, her brother Branwell went to Liverpool on a visit and returned with tales of wretched, starving people crowding the streets and of orphaned children wandering unattended. The people were, in many cases, ill and dying and sometimes spoke a strange, unintelligible language. These were, of course, refugees from the Irish famine and it is likely that the stories of their suffering affected Emily Brontë and possibly gave her inspiration for the discovery of Heathcliff by Mr. Earnshaw.)

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 is to be treated well. As far as Mr. Earnshaw is concerned, he is the head of the family and his is the only opinion which really matters. Such an attitude would be an anathema to us, today. Mr. Earnshaw's lack of comprehension of the resentment engendered by his pronouncement sets in motion a chain of events that will only end thirty one years later, when Heathcliff dies and Cathy and Hareton marry.

- Where is the story set? Does the setting matter?

The entire story of "Wuthering Heights" takes place in a few square miles of Yorkshire moor. The setting is very important as the area's isolation, the forbidding countryside and the harsh climate all go to mould the characters in the novel. This is a wild country and the people are wild too. When "Wuthering Heights" was published, readers in the cities and in the south of England were shocked by the depiction of a world that seemed alien to them. The inhabitants of Wuthering Heights are hard, tough people. They are deeply suspicious of strangers and speak their minds. Mr Lockwood struggles to understand them and is shocked by what he perceives as rough language, brutality and a complete absence of the manners of polite society.

The setting shapes the characters in the novel. Heathcliff is a prime example of this. (K) It is easy to regard him as a monster, particularly in his quest for vengeance and his determination to make the children of his enemies suffer, even though those children are innocent of any wrongdoing. We may ask ourselves if it is possible for such a villain to exist. Indeed, Emily's own sister, Charlotte, asked that very question in the preface to the book when she said "Whether it is right or advisable to create beings like Heathcliff, I do not know: I scarcely think it is." Yet other critics have said that a character like Heathcliff could most certainly have existed in a place as wild and rugged as the Yorkshire moors. It has been argued that such bitter, unending hatred was relatively commonplace and that desire for vengeance – often lasting many years – was a fairly typical feature of family feuds and disagreements between neighbours in rural areas.

- Are there class distinctions?

"Wuthering Heights" is rife with class conflict. At the time when "Wuthering Heights" was written, social standing and property ownership went hand in hand. You could not have one without the other. The Earnshaws and the Lintons both own estates – Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights respectively – whereas Heathcliff has nothing. To the Lintons in particular, he is beneath their notice as a result. (K) When Catherine and Heathcliff go to Thrushcross Grange to spy on the Lintons and are caught, Catherine is treated well once they realise that she is an Earnshaw but they want nothing to do with Heathcliff and call him "quite unfit for a decent house." Heathcliff has no hope of making anything of himself as long as he remains in servitude at Wuthering Heights. Catherine realises this and plans to marry Linton so that she may use his money to raise his social standing. She tells Nelly that "It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now." She goes on to explain that they would be beggars with no prospects were they to marry but that with Edgar Linton's money she will be able to "aid Heathcliff to rise, and place him out of my brother's power." Her plans come to nothing, however, as Heathcliff has overheard her say that it would degrade her to marry him. He disappears and only returns several years later when he has money and power. He goes to great length to take the Earnshaw's and the Linton's properties from them and he does succeed.

Heathcliff does manage to disinherit Hareton Earnshaw and Catherine Linton but at the end of the novel the couple are about to marry and to move to Thrushcross Grange together. Social order has been restored and this is viewed as part of the happy ending.

Another aspect of class distinctions which may seem unusual to the modern reader is the way servants are treated. As those who were born into the upper classes tended to stay in their social grouping, by and large, so those in the serving classes had little chance to better their status. Social mobility was still relatively unheard of and Nelly Dean, for example, would not have expected that she would ever be treated as an equal by Mr. Lockwood, the Earnshaws or the Lintons. Hindley treats Heathcliff appallingly and makes him sleep with the animals because he is "only" a servant and nobody questions his right to do this, even though they might disapprove.

(K) Even Mr. Lockwood, although he is not a cruel man, shows little real feeling for Nelly Dean when he is dealing with her. He calls her a "worthy woman" and should know that she rises early and works hard, but he doesn't seem to be aware of this at all and thinks little of

keeping her up late into the night, telling him the story of "Wuthering Heights." When Nelly protests that it is getting late, Mr. Lockwood tells her that it doesn't matter, as he doesn't have to get up early the next day. His apparent selfishness is not commented on by Nelly, who knows it is not her place to upbraid him for his thoughtlessness. Mr Lockwood also expresses surprise that Nelly should express herself so well for a woman of her class and she explains that she read all the books in the house, save those written in Latin and Greek. This neatly deals with the problem of a servant being a capable narrator, something the readers at the time would have found difficult to accept otherwise.

- Are there race distinctions?

"Wuthering Heights" is set in a remote area in Yorkshire, in the north of England. For the characters to even get as far as Liverpool – sixty miles away – is a serious undertaking and the round trip might take several days. As the action takes place in such an isolated spot, there is little mixing of various races. In fact, even people from the south of England are regarded with suspicion. (K) When Nelly Dean is describing the arrival of Hindley's new bride, Frances, she says, "We don't in general take to foreigners here, Mr. Lockwood, unless they take to us first." Frances Earnshaw is English, but in the eyes of the inhabitants of Wuthering Heights, she is foreign.

(K) There are derogatory references to Heathcliff's possible origin. When he is showing the boy to his wife, Mr Earnshaw says, "it's as dark almost as if it came from the devil." Hindley refers to him as a "gipsy" and an "imp of Satan." Mr and Mrs Linton also refer to him as a "gipsy" and "that strange acquisition my late neighbour made, in his journey to Liverpool – a little Lascar [Indian] or an American or Spanish castaway."

- Are there gender distinctions?

To be a woman in the late seventeen hundreds was to be a second-class citizen in many ways. Power and status in those times came from the possession of money and land. It was difficult for women to own much of either. The inheritance law stated that property passed from father to first-born son or, if there were no sons, to the next closest male relative. If a father wanted to leave his property to his daughter, he had to go to a solicitor and change his will, naming his daughter as the inheritor of his estate. In "Wuthering Heights," Edgar Linton tries to do this before he dies, in order to prevent Heathcliff from inheriting Thrushcross Grange through his son, Linton, but he dies before he can do this. The land passes to

Catherine's husband, young Linton Heathcliff, and when he dies, to his nearest male relative, Heathcliff. Thus, young Catherine is disinherited.

One of the effects of such a system of inheritance was that first cousins often married one another as a way of keeping property in the family. So, we are not meant to be surprised that young Catherine marries her first cousin Linton and when she is widowed, falls in love with and plans to marry her other first cousin, Hareton. It is implied that this is a very satisfactory arrangement as now both houses will be kept in the Earnshaw and Linton families.

The lives of the women in the novel are shaped by their lack of power and independence.

- Mrs Earnshaw is forced to accept the young Heathcliff into her home because her husband says she must.
- Catherine cannot marry Heathcliff because they would be "beggars." She knows that if she marries Edgar Linton she will be "the greatest woman of the neighbourhood." She plans to use her husband's wealth to help the man she truly loves.
- Isabella Linton has been named in her father's will and stands to inherit Thrushcross Grange if her brother dies without a male heir. However, far from being of benefit to her, this fact simply attracts Heathcliff's attention. He decides to marry her as a way to get his hands on the Grange and he treats her abominably until she manages to run away to the south of England.
- Young Catherine is held prisoner by Heathcliff and forced to marry his son, Linton. Even when Linton dies, she is kept at Wuthering Heights, against her will. When Mr Lockwood is looking for somebody to guide him back to Thrushcross Grange after his second visit to Wuthering Heights, Catherine says bitterly "I cannot escort you. They wouldn't let me go to the end of the garden wall." Heathcliff is master of his house and his dependents must obey him.
- Are children treated well?

The position of children in "Wuthering Heights" is very similar to that of women. They also must obey the master of the house and are subject to his will. The ruler of the household has absolute authority and this is supported by law. If, as in the case of Edgar Linton, the man is good and kind, then the children are well treated. Young Catherine has a happy childhood as

her father loves her and he is a decent man. However, if the master of the house is a drunkard like Hindley or a tyrant like Heathcliff, then the children's lives are miserable.

When Heathcliff is first brought to Wuthering Heights, the family is appalled and shows no sympathy towards him. Mrs Earnshaw cannot understand why he has brought "a gipsy brat into the house." Nelly refers to the young, orphaned Heathcliff as "it" and freely admits that when Catherine and Hindley refused to share a bedroom with the boy she "put it on the landing of the stairs, hoping it might be gone on the morrow."

Only Mr Earnshaw's liking for the boy saved him from being relentlessly bullied by Hindley, although the pair detested one another and Hindley took every chance to beat and insult him. When Hindley's abuse of Heathcliff became too much, Mr Earnshaw sent his son away to college. However, Mr Earnshaw died soon afterwards and with him went any protection Heathcliff might have had. Hindley treated young Heathcliff appallingly when he returned and became master of Wuthering Heights. His wife, Frances, disliked Heathcliff and when she told her husband, he turned on the boy at once.

"A few words from her, evincing a dislike to Heathcliff, were enough to rouse in him all his old hatred of the boy. He drove him from their company to the servants, deprived him of the instructions of the curate, and insisted that he should labour out of doors instead; compelling him to do so as hard as any other lad on the farm."

Catherine hardly fares much better under her brother's care and Nelly tells Mr Lockwood that "they promised fair to grow up as rude as savages; the young master being entirely negligent how they behaved, and what they did, so they kept clear of him."

It is only when he is reprimanded by Mr Linton that Hindley takes his responsibilities to his sister seriously and at last begins to make an effort to raise her like a young lady. Heathcliff, however, remains neglected and despised and nobody sees anything wrong with the way he is treated. Indeed, when the young Heathcliff and Catherine are caught spying on the Lintons, Mr Linton says of the boy "would it not be a kindness to the country to hang him at once, before he shows his nature in acts as well as features?" Children were not regarded as being deserving of care simply because of their age and vulnerability. Social standing was far more important than age or gender in eighteenth century England.

- How does the daily life of the characters differ from life in 21st century?

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Late 1700s: World economies are predominantly agrarian.

1847: England is in the midst of an Industrial Revolution whose effects will be felt worldwide. Workers flock to cities from the countryside.

Today: World economies are increasingly linked in a "global community." Intercultural communication and cultural diversity in the so-called service economy are a direct result of advances in transportation and communications.

Late 1700s: Life expectancy is short, owing to harsh living and working conditions. Death in childbirth is common.

1847: Medical advances and improved public health and sanitation decrease maternal and infant mortality.

Today: Though high-technology medicine offers solutions to many medical problems, heart disease and cancer remain major killers, there is no cure for AIDS, and many countries grapple with increasing costs of health care for aging populations.

Late 1700s: Inheritance in England passes from the father to the first-born male. A procedure called "strict settlement" must be invoked to bypass inheritance laws.

1847: Full legal and economic equality for women is first championed in the United States by Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Today: Women worldwide have the right to vote, except in a few Muslim countries. In the United States, while the Equal Rights Amendment failed to obtain ratification,

women increasingly bring successful sexual discrimination and sexual harassment suits against employers.

- Would you like to live in that time or place? Why? Why not?

The lifestyle portrayed in "Wuthering Heights" is a harsh one and it is not necessarily attractive to the modern reader. We have seen that women and children are effectively powerless in the novel and that the temperament of the male authority figure in the house determined the quality of life for his dependents. If he was a cruel man, as Heathcliff was, then they suffered. If he was kind and decent, as Edgar Linton was, then his dependents lived a happy, secure life.

As well as the problems faced by women, children and the lower classes, one of the things with which modern readers struggle is the number of deaths which occur in "Wuthering Heights" over the course of thirty years. Eleven characters die; all of them are young or middle-aged. The novel is a dramatic one and it may be tempting to view so many deaths as melodramatic. However, it is important to realise that there was nothing unusual about such suffering in the world of the Brontës. Emily Brontë and her five siblings died before reaching middle age. Two of her sisters died of TB which they contracted at boarding school. Emily herself was only thirty when she died. Life expectancy was short in the 1880s and in the village of Haworth, where the Brontës lived, forty per cent of the children died before the age of six. Death in childbirth was common also.

Guidelines for Answering Exam Questions

This section is worth 70 marks and should take you around an hour to complete. You will be asked to answer **one** question, A or B.

You may be asked, in part of a question, to answer on one of your texts separately.

Points to note:

- When you read the question, underline the key words, 'one of the texts', 'key moment', 'describe', 'explain' etc.
- Plan your answer. It is well worth taking the time to do this.
- Think in terms of key moments; this will ensure that you refer to the text and will help you to keep the sequence of events in the right order.
- When you are planning your answer, try to think of approximately five key moments which illustrate the mode you have chosen.
- In your introductory paragraph, name the text, the author and the mode you have chosen.
- You must compare your texts and answer on the mode you have chosen.
- Do not, under any circumstances, simply summarise the plot.
- When you are comparing texts, do not write a separate paragraph for each text. Instead, you must constantly compare one with the other.
- Use a selection of the link words and phrases below when comparing texts. The examiner will be looking for them.

Link words and phrases:

Likewise

Conversely

Similarly

On the contrary

Also Whereas

In the same way

Differs from

In the same manner

However

Just as

In contrast

Both texts/characters

This is different to

Each text

While..

Comparing the texts

The examiners' reports show that the two most common faults in the comparative study section of Paper 11 are:

1. Students simply summarising the plot.

2. Students treating each text separately and not comparing them.

Listed below are some sentence structures you could use when linking texts. In these sentences, T1 and T2 refer to the texts, C1 and C2 refer to the characters and A1 and A2 refer to the authors.

- We can see in both T1 and T2 that.....
- Like C1, C2 resists the pressure to conform.....
- I feel that there are many similarities between C1 and C2.
- Unlike C1, C2.....
- The same theme is handled completely differently in T2....
- A1 uses humour while A2 treats the theme more seriously....
- Both characters have to deal with....but C1 handles it very differently to C2....
- In both T1 and T2, the characters face a crisis.....but the outcome is very different.....

It cannot be stressed enough that simply retelling the story will not get you marks. The examiner knows the plot and it is assumed you do too. Avoid falling into the trap of simply describing the Cultural Context / Social Setting, for example, without saying what effect it has on the characters' lives.

In order to get high marks, you need to:

1. Answer the question asked (30%)
2. Make sure every paragraph develops that answer (30%),
3. Use varied and appropriate language (30%)
4. Keep an eye on your spelling and grammar (10%). Think about the first two points when you are planning your answer.