

## Exploring Binaries: The Melding of Realistic and Gothic Elements in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores “binary oppositions” inherent in the nineteenth century English novel, as epitomised in Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*, through subversion and embracing of duality. The recognition of the novel as a fictive narrative form separate from general prose narratives, coincided with the Enlightenment bringing in a strict divisioning between fact and fiction, on the heels of the rise of scientific method. Simultaneously, the Gothic emerged as a reactionary genre, navigating through this ‘scientific’ overreach into the literary. What resulted is a narrative in which the lines between the real and the fantastical blur, where the factual and the fictional cannot be easily distinguished and where one fails to differentiate between reality and imagination. Realism, as opposed to Gothic fiction, deals with the real, trying to expose or portray life as it is. Emily Bronte’s only published novel, *Wuthering Heights*, is a juxtaposition of the two. The paper aims to establish the premise that Bronte subverts ‘binary opposites’ to erase the differences between the real and the fantastical. This study has applied I.A. Richard’s ‘close reading’ as an interpretive strategy and Derrida’s deconstructive method to probe beneath the surface of the apparant. In addition, the research aims to establish how Bronte utilises ‘binary opposites’ to achieve both realistic and gothic modes of storytelling. In conclusion, the study also looks at Bronte’s adoption of the gothic to voice out social injustices, in another example of the deconstructive strategy.

**Keywords:** Gothic, realist, Emily Bronte, juxtaposition, binary opposites, *Wuthering Heights*, close reading

### Introduction

In contemporary times, the genre of the novel in its various forms, has the stamp of a fictional narrative, which despite featuring “realistic characters and plausible events” (Richetti,

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Received 26 April. 2025; Accepted 15 May. 2025. Available online: 25 May. 2025.

Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

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“Introduction” 1), leaves the reader in no doubt as to the fictive nature of the narrative presented to her. However, when one examines the history of the development of the novel in seventeenth century Europe and England, it is seen that storytelling did not always make clear distinctions between the factual and the fictional and this was acceptable to the reading public. The shift in expectation from the public regarding the novel, as presenting a totally fictional narrative, can be traced directly to the onset of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. With its “rationalistic preference for the actual and the historical” (Richetti 3), as reflecting a ‘real’ world, the onus was strictly on presenting facts in prose narratives, and the literary genre of the novel was where a fictional narrative was expected and permitted. Yet, even in the novel, realism started to dominate the fictional narrative, in contrast with the earlier romance or the allegory, where fact and fiction were often interwoven into the narration of the story, along with the fantastical or the fabulous. But now, in keeping with these non-literary influences, writers were forced to establish a strict categorical and absolute difference between ‘the fictional and factual.’ And even while doing so, “the improbable, the marvellous or the melodramatic” (3) were expected to be omitted.

The emergence of the Gothic novel can therefore be seen as a reaction against these strict constraints that tried to separate the fictional and the factual. Later trends even questioned the definition of the ‘factual’, since a generalised ‘real’ world identified in the physical realm, misses many hidden and understated aspects of a subject’s life, which might be mental or psychological, but having a deep impact on the person. The gothic novel can be considered as a subversion of the *realist* genre. Through its many devices of scenes depicting horror, terror, the supernatural, brooding landscapes and dark interiors, to name a few, it sought to rebel against this rational imposition, while also raising social issues hidden beneath the veneer of a civilised society.

Binary opposition is a structuralist term that in literature is used to create meanings in a narrative, through contrast and difference, and “are fundamental to language and thought, shaping how we understand the world” (“Binary Oppositions”). While it is sometimes criticised for over-simplifying complex ideas, its subversion can be used as a tool to “embrace ambiguity and explore the spectrum between opposites” (“Binary Oppositions”).

This paper deals specifically with Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*, published in 1847, under her pseudonym, Ellis Bell, depicting a complex blend of the genres of realism and the gothic.

Its unusual structure, with two primary narrators weaves a story that alternates between the present (Lockwood) and the past (Nelly Dean): “Brontë uses the literary technique of a dual narrative – a form of narrative that incorporates two different perspectives from two different individuals at varying points in time – to directly engage her readers by creating distance and objectivity.” (Bensoussan 1, emphasis added). The blend of real and gothic elements is subtly depicted by the author, and as this paper will strive to prove, she does it through the subverting of binary opposites that realism espouses. This can be represented through an equation:

$$\textit{Wuthering Heights} = \text{Blend of } \textbf{Realist} \text{ (Binary opposites / Appearance vs. Reality) + Gothic (Social Issues)}$$

This paper aims to explore the interplay between binary opposites in the novel, as well as seeks to validate the inference that binary opposites support both gothic and realist modes of storytelling. The ‘Appearance vs. Reality’ theme is a tool which highlights the presence of binary oppositions, which is further used to reiterate the blend of gothic and realism in *Wuthering Heights*. The study also reveals that Emily Bronte has used the gothic as a means to expose or bring to light, certain social issues prevalent in the Victorian Age.

### Theoretical Framework

Through ‘close reading’ as an interpretive strategy, the paper arrives at an important inference: literature becomes the medium of expression for the unsayable and a voice for the underdogs of society. The paper also uses Derrida’s deconstructive theory as a method to examine the use of binary opposites to blur the boundaries between the factual and the fantastical. In a similar use of deconstruction in another Victorian novel, Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, the writer had used the occurrence of binary opposites to explore blind spots and arrive at different centres of interpretations and meanings (Bouthaina, *A Binary Approach to Charles Dickens*). Deconstructive theory in this paper is applied to demonstrate how the author uses binary opposites, to show that binary distinctions do not exist, by merging the factual with the fantastical. Binaries are subverted to invalidate and refuse the alleged centres of fixed meaning. It displaces or rather prevents the absolute concentration of power held by a single interpretation of a text.

The ‘research gap’ explored in this study is the theme of subversion witnessed in the text, by the author almost successfully *erasing* the difference between the real and the fantastical. Supernatural elements such as Catherine’s ghost exist side by side with the main characters

who do not doubt its authenticity. Emily Bronte, thus seamlessly weaves the ‘fictional’ into the ‘real’. There is also a reverse or modified deconstructionism that is at play in the selected novel. Usually, in deconstructive theory, the distinction between the real and the unreal are melded in such a way that one can no longer recognise the distinction between binary oppositions. However, in this case, Bronte does both – she has consciously used the opposites to let the horizons of real and unreal meet (this is modified deconstructionism at work), while retaining their distinctive flavours. When these two blend, such as the supernatural and the natural in the novel, the stark opposites fail to make sense and the author achieves her purpose – the creation of a sense of ambiguity, by which the reader can arrive at multiple centres of meanings or interpretations and thereby choose their own points of entries into the text.

### **Interface between Gothic and Realist**

The word ‘gothic’ comes from the style of architecture that was prevalent in the medieval times, popularized by the Goths. The gothic mode of writing came as a reaction to eighteenth-century ideals of classification and restraint. It was everything that was not expected from a work of art – wild, excessive and uncivilized. It was a movement away from what Plato calls a mimetic representation of the universe to an expressive representation of an author’s emotions. This style was more prominent and attractive to women writers because it helped them shed light on the psychological constraints imposed by patriarchal society.

Throughout the plot, there is an oscillation taking place between gothic and realist; at night the *Wuthering Heights* is a gothic mansion foreboding danger and evoking a sense of horror, and in the morning, it is a working farm. One tends to overlook how seamlessly the gothic has been inserted into the realist to such an extent that there is no distinction between the two.

The sharpness of the fantastical is blunted by the real, in spite of the heightened trajectory of events, the characters and their reactions are anchored in recognisable human psychology. Their emotions such as jealousy, hatred, grief, love, loss, revenge and even humiliation brings a sense of relatability despite the gothic or unreal setting. The key feature of the gothic is moral ambiguity and this is made believable by the nuanced portrayal of the characters of Heathcliff, Catherine Earnshaw, Edgar Linton and others. There is some light and dark to each of these characters which makes them complex and real human beings. The author’s focus on the intricacies of human relationships, family dynamics and human emotions add the magic of realism to the fantastical. Moreover, though the novel is predominantly categorised as gothic,

the detailed descriptions of the Yorkshire landscape, the regional dialect used by Joseph and other such details add to the nuances of the real. This novel is thus a unique interface between the gothic and realist genres.

### **Juxtaposition of Binary opposites as a Tool of Realism**

While the previous section asserted the novel as a meeting point of the factual and the fantastical, this section explores the juxtaposition of binary oppositions, to accentuate the element of realism. It is seen that binaries are depicted across three levels – the setting of the novel, the different characters and within the same character.

Referring to the *setting*, Lord David Cecil argues in *Early Victorian Novelists* (1934) that “*Wuthering Heights* presents a vision of ‘the whole created cosmos,’ a cosmos consisting of two complementary principles, that of ‘storm’ and that of ‘calm’ . . . represented in the novel by the two family houses” (Cecil, qtd. by Fletcher 105). The children of Thrushcross Grange are presented as stark opposites to those of the Heights. The Grange pair are portrayed as subtle, refined, and well-mannered, whereas those at the Heights are seen as wild, untamed, vulgar, and crude. Next, there is also a juxtaposition between the Heights and Moors. Young Catherine Earnshaw feels restricted and suffocated in her male-dominated household. Catherine is constantly reprimanded for her behaviour and none seem to accept her for who she was. In contrast, the Moors allow her to be her true self – to enjoy and celebrate the individual that she is. Thus, the Heights becomes a symbol of dominance and subjugation, curbing individual freedom. The Moors symbolize freedom, boundless, and untamed. The wild Moors provides the setting for the mansion, in what could be a melding of “Nature and Culture”. This idea is echoed by Richard Veit who further develops this by stating the allegorical nature of the Heights and Grange. The former represents the forces of nature and the latter represents civilization. The dwellers or inmates of the estates also mirror the allegorical traits of these respective structures.

The next binary oppositions are seen within the different characters of the novel and their contrasting reactions to similar situations. Moreover, the gender roles are also seen to be reversed. This is seen in the gift that Catherine wants from Mr. Earnshaw; it is different from what Hindley wanted. Hindley wanted a fiddle while Catherine wanted a whip. The reversal of gender roles is also seen in their reactions when Heathcliff was brought into their household – Hindley bursts out in tears and Catherine spits at him, hurling abusive words. In addition, the

*binary* element is brought about through the representation of the love interests of Catherine Earnshaw – Heathcliff and Edgar Linton. The former is a nameless orphan, crude and uneducated. He is not a gentleman according to the dictums of society. Heathcliff is also Catherine's partner in crime, a comrade in her secret escapades. Edgar Linton, on the other hand, is depicted as a gentleman, refined and educated. Unlike Heathcliff, he has an identity – the Linton heir, a parentage -- son of Mr. and Mrs. Linton, a class -- the upper class. Heathcliff is a social outcast, whereas Linton is society's darling. Both belong to the extremities of the social spectrum.

Similarly, a binary exists within the character of Heathcliff. At the onset of the novel, Heathcliff is a victim of abuse at the hands of Hindley Earnshaw. The sympathy and pity of the readers are evoked through the pathos of his life. However, no sooner does the plot unfold than the readers are left stunned and somewhat disgusted at what Heathcliff becomes. Thus, the author introduces Heathcliff as the victim and then presents Heathcliff as the villain. There is no development in his character -- a flat character. As a victim of abuse, Heathcliff must know the pain and penetrating impact of such ill treatment. However, when he gained power, Heathcliff emulated his abuser.

An internal set of binaries is also witnessed in Catherine Earnshaw's character in the stark representation of the innocence of childhood versus corruption in adulthood.. As a child, she would never leave Heathcliff; he was seen as an equal, someone worthy of being her companion. Later, as she grows up, she is corrupted by the mentality of society; Catherine begins to feel ashamed of Heathcliff. She confesses to Nelly that it would degrade her if she were to marry someone like Heathcliff. Catherine also chooses her life partner based on the social status. (Bronte 72). Here, another binary can be inserted, Catherine is attracted to what she is not, that is, Edgar Linton. She says that they are different as a 'moonbeam from lightning' and 'frost from fire.' (Bronte 74) Ironically, the thing that draws her to Edgar are their *binaries*. Adding on, Catherine believed that after her death, she would reach a place of calm and peace. Paradoxically, after she dies, she is seen as an apparition who haunts the mansion for twenty odd years. There was no peace after death for Catherine.

Similarly, there is a tug of war between power and passion. Hindley competes with Heathcliff to win his father's love. Somehow, the passion for love is associated with power. Mr. Earnshaw's love places Heathcliff in a favorable position of power in the Earnshaw household.

This drives Hindley to hate. Catherine also finds herself at the vortex of this war between power and passion. Her desire to gain power in society was greater than her love for Heathcliff. In hindsight, Bronte highlights how binary opposites are deeply rooted in human nature and thereby effectively uses them as a tool of realism.

### Binary opposites as a Tool of Gothic to Expose Certain Social Evils

This section provides insights into Bronte's deft application of binary opposites in a fantastical setting to ensure that the veiled and ignored societal issues catches her audience's attention. It must be noted that the author, Emily Bronte grew up in times of great political and social tumults. She was well-informed of the social and political reforms of the mid-Victorian era. This is not explicitly observed in her work. However, it is subtly interwoven with the narrative of the story.

The first evil highlighted in this story is racial discrimination. With the onset of the Victorian era, England became a superpower, due to her various colonies. When Heathcliff was brought to the Earnshaw household, he was seen as a pariah, an outcast. His dark complexion made Nelly Dean associate Heathcliff with something supernatural and unnatural. The colonial mentality of labeling people of colour, as odd or exotic, has been revealed here.

Next, the issue of class distinction and the misuse of power has been highlighted. Heathcliff, an unnamed boy, suffers gravely at the hands of the so-called high society. The abuse he undergoes destroys him from within, which turns him into a vicious person thirsty for revenge. Later, his mysterious disappearance and sudden appearance (a key feature of the gothic) as a wealthy man places him at the apex of power. Thus, this enables him to meticulously plan and execute his revenge. The gothic has been interwoven with privilege. The atrocities of violence and the brutality committed by Heathcliff are signs of the misuse of power by the dominant class. At last, the victim becomes the abuser.

Further, through the Gothic element of violence and brutality, Bronte subtly introduced the issue of domestic violence and female subjugation. Throughout the story, we see that the male characters try to contain Catherine Earnshaw's wild, untamable spirit. She became too much to handle for a male dominated society. *Wuthering Heights* is a story of brave women such as Catherine Earnshaw and Catherine Linton, trying to survive in a patriarchal society. Isabella,



the wife of Heathcliff is a victim of domestic abuse; through her story, marriage is portrayed as an institution of abuse and entrapment during the staid Victorian Age.

Another social issue raised in *Wuthering Heights*, is that of materialism. The materialistic society cared for nothing but hollow name and fame. This is evidenced in the way Catherine Earnshaw tries to use her husband's money to raise the status of Heathcliff and help him climb the social ladder. She rejects or forsakes her one true love for materialistic happiness. She says, "I shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighbourhood, and I shall be proud of having such a husband' (Bronte 61). It is an exact reflection of Victorian society trapped in its preoccupation with money and materialism. Even Catherine, the untamed, succumbs to the glitter and shine of faux power.

Similarly, the issue of social containment (Al-Yasin, "Social Containment in *Wuthering Heights*") can also be seen in the story. Throughout the novel, Heathcliff is viewed as an anti-hero because he is not a prototypical Victorian hero. He belonged to a lower class and did not conform to Victorian ideals. Thus, he was viewed as a threat from very the beginning. In the entirety of the plot, we find an attempt to contain power within the upper class. Although Heathcliff amasses wealth, his standing in society remains the same. Moreover, the ghost of Catherine appears before Heathcliff, not allowing him to leave a will. Paradoxically, she reveals herself to Heathcliff, not with the intention of a reunion, but she wants to make sure that the Grange and Heights go back to their rightful owners (Hareton Earnshaw and Catherine Linton). The gothic element of the supernatural is used to even out the scales and restore power back to the ruling class. Supernatural intervention ensures that power remains in the hands of aristocracy (Al-Yasin 44).

In addition, gothic as a genre has been used to demarcate between transgressions committed by men and women protagonists, against prevailing norms. Gothic has gendered the concept of transgressions. David Punter and Glen Byron argue that while 'male protagonist's transgressions of social taboos ... involves the confrontation of... various social institutions, including the law,' ("Female Gothic" 278), female gothic characters transgress in a different way, usually represented by the female protagonist's attempts to 'escape from a confining interior' such as a great house or castle, a marriage, or something that imprisons. The heroine's experience of transgression is a journey towards self-emancipation, "leading towards the assumption of some kind of agency and power in the patriarchal world" (Punter and Byron



279). This is seen in the second generation in the novel, when Catherine Linton assumes ownership of her home and is free to love and heal Hareton Crenshaw, both victims of Heathcliff's cruelty. This is achieved with some 'supernatural' help from the dead Catherine, who relentlessly haunts Heathcliff literally to his death.

This concept of male versus female transgressions can be applied to Heathcliff and Catherine too. Heathcliff is confronted with the need to prove himself to a high society that rejects him and treats him like an outcast. He is the brooding Byronic hero as opposed to the ideal Victorian family man. Heathcliff's entire journey is based on his need to seek social validation, he wants to reverse his fortune and prove his mettle, and he does this by guile and cunning, and psychological games. When we shift our focus to Catherine Earnshaw, we notice that she has to fight for her autonomy and agency at the Heights and even at the Grange. On the one hand, Heathcliff's transgressions are external -- challenging the social hierarchy and moral codes of his society; on the other, Catherine's are inwardly focused, that which stems from her attempt to challenge the limitations set upon her as a woman in a Victorian society and her own conflicting desires. Catherine dies trying to free herself, but comes back as a spectral presence. Similarly, Isabella Linton marries Heathcliff which signifies a misguided transgression committed in the naivety of youth. However, her act of defiance and escape from Wuthering Heights, marks her empowering transgression. Her decision to carry and raise Heathcliff's child is also an act of transgression because the Victorian society rarely approved of single mothers.

Realism was the pet writing style of most Victorian novelists -- capturing the mundane everyday lives of people. Authors deviated from the tenet of 'art for art's sake' and emphasised on the lofty ideals of truth, justice, love and brotherhood. This means they were moralists and idealists at heart. Amidst this mainstream literature, Victorian women authors such as the Bronte sisters, chose the gothic to subvert societal constraints, express repressed desires and fears, and challenge the notion of the ideal woman. In a nutshell, these women authors utilised gothic tropes for social commentary. Within the fantastical they wove the real. The gothic style allowed them to critique patriarchy, social and class hierarchies and shed light on social decay.

### **Appearance versus Reality**

The utilisation of the theme of appearance versus reality facilitates the novel to smoothly oscillate between real and fantastical, which also adds another facet to the already existing *binary oppositions*. This section deals intensively with this premise.

At first glance, the Grange is seen as a symbol of civility and civilization. However, this illusion is broken when young Catherine and Heathcliff escape to the Grange and look inside through a small window. There is a vicious ongoing war between Linton children and a small puppy (Bronte 45). Under the façade of ‘civility’ the small puppy is almost torn apart. The reaction from Mr. and Mrs. Linton is also not in line with a so-called upper class; they threaten to shoot the trespassers. Catherine’s leg is almost maimed by their bulldog (Bronte 46).

In addition, the frame narrator Mr. Lockwood represents the duality of appearance versus reality. Lockwood rents the Grange on the pretext of taking a break from his city life. The name Lockwood, itself suggests ‘to lock out’ something that is natural through acquired culture. This indicates that Lockwood must be hiding his natural instincts beneath the veil of refinement. Violence, an element of gothic, in the scene where Lockwood encounters the ghost of young Catherine, is gruesome and horrific. This too takes place under the veil of civilization.

That ‘appearances are deceptive’ is also seen in Isabella Linton’s misjudgment of Heathcliff. Heathcliff exudes a sense of mystery and ambiguity, typical of a Byronic hero, which draws young Isabella to him. However, it does not take much time into their marriage for her to discover the true nature and ulterior motives of her husband. She comes face-to-face with Heathcliff, the anti-hero or villain of the novel and leaves him. Even Lockwood falls prey to Heathcliff’s ‘charm’. Lockwood’s first impressions of Heathcliff are also quite contrary to his true nature. Lockwood is tricked by the mask of culture and sophistication.

Catherine Earnshaw, even though she is drawn inexplicably to Heathcliff in a primal attraction, forsakes him for what she considered to be a good and happy life. She justifies her decision to marry Edgar by saying, “He’s more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same”(Bronte 74). She justifies her choice by asserting that Heathcliff and she were two entities sharing one soul and they can never be separate from the other. Yet her marriage to Edgar brings about her ultimate doom; throughout her married life she remains highly unsatisfied. Her discontentment and regret drives her to insanity. Thus, through the use

of the binary of appearance vs. reality, Bronte brings to her readers' attention the gothic elements that lies hidden beneath the veneer of the 'civilized.'

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper explores the interconnectedness between the gothic and the realistic; the use of binary opposites and the theme of 'appearance versus reality' highlights the psychological depths of tragedy, violence and suffering, which the 'real' hides and the gothic exposes. *Wuthering Heights* as a literary work is a beautiful and complex blend of the real and the gothic, in which Emily Bronte weaves a tale of brilliance. The flexibility in the author's style paves the way for innovative and creative ways of interpreting the text. This paper uncovers just a fraction of what can be further studied and explored in this path-breaking novel. There are no limitations to creative and innovative theories in the future.

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