

THE HOUSEKEEPER'S STORY: NELLY DEAN AS THE PROTAGONIST
OF *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Council of
Texas State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
with a Major in Literature
May 2020

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank my thesis chair, Dr. Robert Tally, for encouraging me to undertake this project and for the time and attention he gave to my work during the process. I am truly grateful that I have had this opportunity to learn from him.

I am grateful also to my thesis committee members, Dr. Teya Rosenberg and Dr. Graeme Wend-Walker, for the gift of their time and insight.

A warm thank you to my fiancé, Dylan Pique, for sharing in each of my ups and downs throughout this process. It is most rewarding to celebrate with someone who has been there for both.

And finally, thank you to my parents for always supporting me and believing in me. My education is a result of their generosity, love, and support.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Wuthering Heights is best remembered for the tragic love story between Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff, so a basic plot summary would focus on these two characters. Their story begins one night when Catherine is a child, and her father returns from a trip to Liverpool with a small, orphaned boy under his coat. The entire household is apprehensive of the new addition to the family, but Catherine soon grows to adore Heathcliff. The two grow up together, “run[ning] away to the moors in the morning and remain[ing] there all day” (Brontë 37). Heathcliff becomes Mr. Earnshaw’s favorite among his children. Out of jealousy, Catherine’s older brother, Hindley, bullies Heathcliff. After the death of his wife, and shortly before his own death, Mr. Earnshaw sends Hindley away to college, while Heathcliff continues to stay at the Heights.

Heathcliff and Catherine become inseparable. With little to no supervision, they grow more and more mischievous and unruly. On one of their outings, they stumble upon Wuthering Height’s neighboring estate, Thrushcross Grange, where Mr. and Mrs. Linton live with their children. As Heathcliff and Catherine spy on young Edgar and Isabella, Catherine is injured by the Linton’s bulldog. Mrs. Linton takes Catherine in and nurses her back to health, and Heathcliff is forced to return to the Heights. During her stay with the Lintons, Catherine is influenced by the genteel family’s refined and elegant lifestyle. When she is finally returned to the Heights, her older brother, who returned from college when his father died, exclaims, “Why Cathy, you are quite a beauty! I should scarcely have known you: you look like a lady now” (Brontë 47). In the following months, Catherine spends more time with the Linton siblings, Edgar and Isabella, than her rowdy playmate, Heathcliff. A few years later, Edgar proposes to

Catherine, and she accepts. Though she loves Heathcliff, Catherine has been so influenced by the Linton's proper way of life, she feels pressure to marry based on status rather than love.

Heathcliff overhears Catherine say to the housekeeper that "it would degrade [her] to marry Heathcliff" (Brontë 63). Heartbroken, he runs away to seek his fortune away from the Heights. While he is away, Edgar and Catherine are married and move to Thrushcross Grange. Heathcliff eventually returns to the Heights with the intention of seeking revenge on Hindley and Edgar. Hindley's wife dies giving birth to their son, Hareton, a tragedy that causes Hindley to turn to alcoholism and gambling. Heathcliff uses this against his childhood abuser, lending him money until Hindley is in his debt. Meanwhile, Heathcliff elopes with Isabella Linton out of spite for her brother. Upon Heathcliff's return, Catherine is caught between her happy life with Edgar and passion for her dear, lost friend. She falls into a sickly despair and dies giving birth to her and Edgar's daughter, who is named after her mother.

When Hindley dies, Heathcliff becomes master of the Heights as well as caretaker to Hareton, who he treats like a servant. Finally aware of her husband's villainy, a pregnant Isabella runs away to London where she gives birth to their son whom she names Linton. Heathcliff schemes to have young Catherine marry his son, Linton, so that he may one day gain control of Thrushcross Grange. Many years later this scheme is realized. Young Catherine and Linton are forced to marry, followed shortly by Edgar's death. Linton, who was born sickly, also dies shortly after the marriage. Heathcliff becomes master of both the Heights and the Grange and is sole guardian to young Catherine and Hareton.

Arguably, it is at this point in the story that the novel actually begins. Indeed, the novel does begin here as the novel is told out of chronological order. Heathcliff rents out Thrushcross Grange to Lockwood, a gentleman from London who desires a change of scenery from city life. The first three chapters of the novel detail Lockwood's introduction to Heathcliff, young Catherine, and Hareton during a visit to the Heights, at the end of which Lockwood asks the housekeeper, Ellen (Nelly) Dean, for his sullen neighbors' backstory. Lockwood soon falls ill, which creates the perfect excuse to hear the whole story (summarized above) in great detail. As he recovers from his illness, he listens to Nelly's story and records all that she says in his journal. When he is well again, he returns to London. After some time has passed, Lockwood finds himself visiting a friend in the country; he comes close enough to his old lodging at the Grange that he decides to pay a visit to the Heights. He meets Nelly who tells him that Heathcliff has died and that young Catherine and Hareton have inherited the Heights and the Grange and plan to be married.

Thus, Heathcliff and Catherine's tragic story is filtered through two different narrators: Lockwood, an impressionable gentleman who stumbles accidentally into the story when he becomes a tenant at Thrushcross Grange and Nelly Dean who serves as housekeeper of both households throughout the story. The framing narrators of the novel are often forgotten in favor of the chaotic romance between Heathcliff and Catherine, which Nelly recounts to Lockwood. However, as I will show in this thesis, it does a disservice to the novel to look past this narrative structure, and in fact, there is evidence in the novel to suggest that *Wuthering Heights* is not actually about Heathcliff and Catherine at all, but is actually the story of its narrator, Nelly Dean.

The reliability of *Wuthering Heights*'s two narrators is often called into question. Lockwood is generally viewed as a naïve outsider who is too narrow-minded and self-interested to understand the story that takes place at the Heights, but it is Nelly who is most often held responsible for being unreliable. For example, though James Quinnell calls both Lockwood and Nelly "Emily Brontë's unreliable narrators," he ends up mostly focusing on how Nelly's narration mischaracterizes the people in her narrative (198). He writes that "Nelly hinders rather than helps our understanding of the characters at the Heights" (Quinnell 200). He argues that Nelly's inability to be objective taints her narrative and manipulates the way both Lockwood and the readers of *Wuthering Heights* understand the story.

James Hafley and Gideon Shunami attempt to show how Nelly takes advantage of Lockwood's gullibility to manipulate the narrative to serve her own interests. Though they go about it in different ways and for different reasons, Hafley and Shunami both blame much of the tragedies in the novel on Nelly, claiming that she intentionally tries to sabotage the lives of those she serves.

In her article, "*Wuthering Heights* and the Text between the Lines," Bette London urges readers to search for the "true reading" of the novel beneath the surface of the narration. She argues that the novel shows us how "to look for the 'true' story in the margins and between the lines of the authorized text" in Lockwood and Nelly's narration (London 37). Alan R. Brick says something similar, claiming that "readers, becoming increasingly discontented with Nelly Dean's interpretations, are moved closer to the core of the book" (84). This "core" is the story of Heathcliff and Catherine.

Understanding Nelly as an unreliable narrator causes readers and critics to carefully scrutinize Nelly's narrative, but usually for all the wrong reasons. These critics that I have mentioned look at Nelly's narrative suspiciously because they believe Nelly is either not telling the whole story or is manipulating it based on her own opinions. While it is true that Nelly's narration is influenced by her own biases and that this affects the way Lockwood and readers of the novel interpret her narrative, the issue that I take with these interpretations of Nelly is that they imply that her perspective is a mere distraction of the "real story" of Heathcliff and Catherine. To suggest that there is a *true* reading that exists beneath Nelly's unreliable narration suggests that her narration is somehow false. This assumption is unhelpful when the story of Heathcliff and Catherine does not exist outside of Nelly's narration. In truth, the reader never really gets to know Heathcliff and Catherine, but instead gets to know Nelly and Lockwood through the way they describe these characters. For this reason, it is important to carefully scrutinize Nelly's opinion-filled narrative not for the sake of getting to know Heathcliff and Catherine beyond the influence of Nelly's opinions but with the intention of getting to know the narrator for her own sake.

Lockwood claims to be uninterested in Nelly's own affairs because he does not value her situation or perspective. If, like Lockwood, we are only interested in the story of Heathcliff and Catherine, we may deem it appropriate to be suspicious of Nelly's narration, but if Emily Brontë were interested in providing Heathcliff and Catherine's story to her readers, she wouldn't have chosen to filter it through two complicated narrators. It is unwarranted to blame Nelly for the tragedies of others, and it does a disservice to the novel to consider Nelly an unreliable narrator if this categorization is

accompanied by an assumption that the focus of the novel is on Heathcliff and Catherine rather than on Nelly for her own sake. Nelly is unreliable because her intimacy with the story makes it impossible for her to be objective, and this is precisely why she is such an interesting narrator. Terrence McCarthy writes, that it is Nelly's "very involvement in the action which colors and distorts her narrative" (56-57). McCarthy uses Nelly's disapproval of Catherine as an example of the way Nelly's own bias enters her narrative. He writes, "We are constantly aware that we are reading about the passions of people whom we do not fully admire, about a situation that is far from ideal" (57). This observation proves that *Wuthering Heights* is an account of Nelly's perspective rather than an objective representation of Heathcliff and Catherine.

There is perhaps a better word to describe Lockwood's and Nelly's narration than *unreliable*. Dorrit Cohn defines a *discordant narrator* as someone "who is biased or confused, inducing one to look, behind the story he or she tells, for a different meaning from the one he himself or she herself provides" (Cohn 307). Where Nelly is biased because she is an insider in the story she tells, Lockwood is always confused as an outsider to the story he is told. Cohn explains that "a sense of discordance arises only when the narrator's normative views appear to clash in some manner with the story he or she tells" (Cohn 308). Though Cohn actually references Nelly in her article, this description of a discordant narrator more accurately applies to Lockwood. It is true that Nelly's narration is more complex than Lockwood's, leaving room for a sense of discordance, but Lockwood's narration is the one that truly clashes with the story he attempts to understand. As I will outline in Chapter II, Lockwood simplifies the people

he meets at the Heights into romantic heroes in his imagination. This view of Heathcliff and Catherine clashes with the complex portrait Nelly creates in her narrative.

A discordant narrative contains contradictions and inconsistencies that hint at information being manipulated or left out to some extent. Nelly often contradicts herself in her narrative. For example, her depictions of Heathcliff ebb and flow between savage and sympathetic. When Mr. Earnshaw first brings Heathcliff to the Heights, Nelly refers to young Heathcliff as “it,” as if he were a stray dog. But when Isabella rants about what a monster Heathcliff was to her, Nelly defends his humanity saying, “Be more charitable: there are worse men than he is yet!” (Brontë 134). Though she is often responsible for dehumanizing Heathcliff herself, Nelly also expresses sympathy for him and defends his humanity when others criticize him. Contradictions like these in Nelly’s narration reveal Nelly’s humanity as a developed and complicated character in her own right. George J. Worth writes, “In Nelly, Emily Brontë ingeniously produced the exactly needed combination of servant, companion, and saucy antagonist. With personal dignity, she keeps secrets; as a respected nurse, she tattles; she intercepts letters between young culprits’ she scolds; she watches pots” (Worth 303). The fact that Nelly has her own opinions, morals, and biases is evidence of her well-rounded character. It is time that readers of *Wuthering Heights* stop viewing Nelly’s unreliable narration as an obstacle of the “true” story of Heathcliff and Catherine and instead find value in the perspective she has to offer as a female domestic servant living in the nineteenth-century.

Historian Carolyn Steedman is one of the rare critics who does value Nelly’s narrative for what it can teach us about the narrator herself. In her book, *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age*, Steedman argues that

Wuthering Heights can be read like a history book when it comes to gaining the nineteenth-century servant's perspective. She writes,

Emily Brontë's novel is part of a history of narrative forms, and thus of the ways of thinking and feeling attendant on them. Of course, among all the things *Wuthering Heights* is, and probably the least of them, is a social history of service and a psychology of servitude; but that is what I must take form it, compelled to do so by the rank and status of its principal narrator. (195)

Nelly was, of course, not a historical person, but her story in *Wuthering Heights* gives voice to the hundreds of thousands of real female domestic servants who were not able to tell their stories. Through Nelly, Emily Brontë provides insight into the life of a domestic servant living in a nineteenth-century household, and *Wuthering Heights* is her story. It is time that Nelly is viewed not merely as the narrator of someone else's story, but the teller of her own story.

In Chapter II, I explore Lockwood's role as narrator of the novel. *Wuthering Heights* is presented through Lockwood's journal. However, though Lockwood is the narrator, most of the story is told by Nelly in her own words. Lockwood claims that his record of her story remains true to the original. He writes in his journal, "I'll continue it in her own words, only a little condensed. She is, on the whole, a very fair narrator and I don't think I could improve her style" (Brontë 121). Brontë makes sure to establish that Nelly's narrative is true to Nelly's voice. This comment suggests that even Lockwood considers Nelly to be the narrator of the story. Readers are meant to trust Lockwood's transcription of Nelly's story as authentic to the original. However, Nicholas Frangipane argues the opposite in his article, "Lockwood the Liar." He questions whether it is

believable that Lockwood could remember Nelly's story word-for-word. However, evidence from the novel proves that it is equally unbelievable that Lockwood could make up the story of *Wuthering Heights* on his own. In Chapter II, I highlight the contrast between Nelly's narrative and Lockwood's interpretation of it, revealing that Lockwood's assumptions and naiveté prevent him from grasping the complexity of Nelly's story. Chapter II explores the role of *Wuthering Heights*'s framing narrator and sets the scene for the next two chapters' exploration of Nelly as narrator.

In Chapter III, I examine Nelly's narration in terms of gossip. Lockwood hopes Nelly will be "a regular gossip," so she will tell him the story of his strange neighbors at the Heights (Brontë 26). In this chapter, I consider whether "gossip" is an appropriate categorization of Nelly's narrative. Using the works of Markman Ellis, Erin, M. Goss, and Kristen A. Pond, I discuss the etymology of the word "gossip" and detail the historical and political connotations of the word. I show how the word has become associated with feminine and inferior modes of discourse. Because of this, the reliability and value of Nelly's narration is called into question by both Lockwood and critics of the novel. For example, contradictions arise in scholarly examinations of Nelly both as a narrator and as a character. I will discuss critics who believe that Nelly is both ill-equipped to understand the complexity of the story she tells, and yet still manages to manipulate the narrative to suit her own needs. In Chapter III, I will deconstruct these arguments to reveal how they misuse evidence from the novel to unfairly blame Nelly for the misfortunes of others. I argue that it is precisely Nelly's complex interpretation of the events she narrates that is the center of *Wuthering Heights*.

In Chapter IV, I make the distinction between Nelly the person and Nelly the servant. I outline how her role as domestic servant does not define the boundaries of her relationships with those she serves. Before Mr. Earnshaw brought Heathcliff home to the Heights as a child, Nelly was more of a foster child in the household than a servant. She tells Lockwood that she saw Catherine and Hindley as her foster brother and sister rather than her master and mistress. When Heathcliff is brought home, however, this dynamic changes. Heathcliff takes Nelly's role as foster child and Nelly is forced to officially take over her position as servant.

Nelly's layered relationships to the other characters in the novel is what makes Nelly the perfect choice for narrator of *Wuthering Heights*. She is as close as family to Heathcliff, Hindley, and Catherine. They trust her as a confidant as well as seek her help, advice, and approval as though she were an older sister. On the other hand, Nelly's position as domestic servant gives her opportunities to be present for private moments that even a sister might not have access to. Nelly's complicated relationship with the people she serves not only makes her the perfect narrator for Lockwood, but also the perfect narrator for Emily Brontë to craft a masterpiece about human relationship, blurred identity, and domestic service in the nineteenth-century. After making the distinction between Nelly the servant and Nelly the character, I will discuss the narrative structure of the novel itself, considering why Heathcliff and Catherine themselves were not chosen to be narrators, ultimately proving that the narrative structure itself indicates that Nelly is the true protagonist of *Wuthering Heights*.

II. THE “LOOKER ON”: LOCKWOOD AS NARRATOR

Wuthering Heights begins and ends with Lockwood. Though Nelly narrates most of the novel, her voice is filtered through Lockwood as he records her words in his journal. Encompassing Nelly’s narration is Lockwood’s interpretation of her story, which is revealed in Lockwood’s own narration at the beginning and end of the novel. Although Lockwood is nominally the narrator of *Wuthering Heights*, Nelly becomes the *de facto* narrator as she tells the story to him. For a variety of reasons, readers have questioned the reliability of Nelly and her account. However, I wish to show in this chapter that Lockwood is the true unreliable narrator of *Wuthering Heights*.

Literary critic James Wood makes a distinction between different kinds of unreliable narrators in his book, *How Fiction Works*. He argues that most first-person narrators are actually reliable, and that “[e]ven the apparently unreliable narrator is more often than not reliably unreliable” (Wood 5). A *reliably unreliable* narrator is identified by “authorial flagging,” or hints throughout the novel that consistently warn or remind the reader that the narrator is unreliable (Wood 5). An *unreliably unreliable* narrator, on the other hand, is much more mysterious and hard to spot. This type of unreliable narrator is not clearly flagged by the author. Nicholas Frangipane argues that Lockwood is an unreliably unreliable narrator in his article, “Lockwood the Liar: A Call to Reconsider *Wuthering Heights* as a Metafictional Work on the Limits of Critique.” He argues that “because everything is filtered through [Lockwood] we have no markers to indicate the extent of his unreliability” (Frangipane 32). Lockwood is the framing narrator of *Wuthering Heights*. Even though most of the novel is narrated by Nelly, her

words are filtered through Lockwood as he transcribes her words in his diary. Wood calls an unreliably unreliable narrator “truly unreliable” and “unknowable” (6).

Frangipane uses these words to describe Lockwood, adding that as an unreliably unreliable narrator, Lockwood “has complete control over the text” (32).

Frangipane argues that it is impossible to know how unreliable Lockwood is because the entire novel is filtered through his own perspective. This gives him the power to manipulate the readers’ opinions and conceal his unreliability. However, Lockwood is knowable through the way he describes the other characters in the novel. And I would challenge the argument that we have no indications in the text when to be suspicious of Lockwood’s judgment. On the contrary, literary scholar Terrence McCarthy calls Lockwood “The Incompetent Narrator of *Wuthering Heights*” in his article of the same name. He argues that Lockwood’s “comments are discredited” throughout the novel (McCarthy 61). Lockwood’s poor judgment of himself and others is exposed early in the novel, indicating that readers should be suspicious of his opinions. In this chapter, I will show that the contrast between Lockwood’s imagination and reality reveals Lockwood’s inability to understand the story that Nelly tells him, indicating that we should be suspicious of Lockwood’s interpretations of her story.

The first three chapters of *Wuthering Heights* are narrated by Lockwood and detail his first visits to the Heights as well as his introduction to Heathcliff, Nelly, young Catherine, and Hareton. In the first chapter, Lockwood rides from the Grange to the Heights with the intention of visiting his landlord. The novel opens with Lockwood recording this meeting in his diary. He writes,

1801.—I have just returned from a visit to my landlord—the solitary neighbor that I shall be troubled with. This is certainly a beautiful country! In all of England, I do not believe that I could have fixed on a situation so completely removed from the stir of society. A perfect misanthropist’s heaven—and Mr. Heathcliff and I are such a suitable pair to divide the desolation between us. A capital fellow! He little imagined how my heart warmed towards him when I beheld his black eyes withdraw so suspiciously under their brows. (Brontë 3)

In the first paragraph of Lockwood’s narrative, he attempts to establish a connection between himself and Heathcliff. He identifies himself as a misanthropist, claiming to appreciate the isolation provided by the countryside. However, over the course of this chapter, the reader encounters plenty of “authorial flags” to hint that Lockwood is not as misanthropic as he claims to be.

When he meets Heathcliff at the gate, he introduces himself with pep and finesse: “Mr. Lockwood, your new tenant, sir. I do myself the honour of calling as soon as possible after my arrival, to express the hope that I have not inconvenienced you by the perseverance in soliciting the occupation of Thrushcross Grange: I heard yesterday you had had some thoughts—” (Brontë 1). Heathcliff interrupts this introduction, literally “wincing” at Lockwood’s friendliness. He commands Lockwood to “walk in!” in such a way that it “expressed the sentiment, ‘Go to the Deuce!’” (Brontë 1). Nonetheless, Lockwood accepts Heathcliff’s abrupt invitation, “interested in a man who seemed more exaggeratedly reserved than myself” (Brontë 1). Again, Lockwood compares himself to Heathcliff. He attempts to establish himself as a reserved man comfortable with and

desirous of seclusion, akin to Heathcliff himself. However, Brontë makes the contrast between Lockwood's vivaciousness and Heathcliff's impolite shortness abundantly clear.

As Lockwood follows Heathcliff across the threshold of Wuthering Heights, he wonders at the ornate carvings above the door and comments how he "would have made a few comments, and requested a short history of the place from the surly owner but his attitude at the door appeared to demand my speedy entrance, or complete departure, and I had no desire to aggravate his impatience" (Brontë 4). If Heathcliff's body language and expression hadn't made it obvious that it was not welcome, Lockwood would have commented on the appearance of the house and attempted to initiate a conversation about its history. Lockwood expresses himself with high spirits and records in his diary his regret that Heathcliff was not more willing to make conversation. In their first meeting, Lockwood's gregariousness is contrasted by Heathcliff's true reclusive tendencies, revealing the irony that Lockwood feels that he and Heathcliff share a reserved nature.

By the end of his short visit, Lockwood finally catches on to Heathcliff's lack of interest in his company. However, despite this realization, Lockwood makes plans to visit the Heights again the following day. He reflects comically, in the last lines of the chapter, that Heathcliff "evidently wished no repetition of my intrusion. I shall go notwithstanding. It is astonishing how sociable I feel myself compared with him" (Brontë 7). Lockwood's lack of self-awareness as well as his misinterpretation of Heathcliff becomes more and more clear throughout the novel, but even in this first chapter, it is apparent that Lockwood is not reserved but friendly and sociable. By the end of the chapter, the reader does not share Lockwood's surprise that he is more sociable than his "surly" landlord (Brontë 4).

Even though Lockwood claims to be delighted to have escaped the city for the quiet countryside, it takes him no time at all to grow tired of his own company. In fact, as Worth has put it, Lockwood “seizes on a flimsy pretext—the servant girl is cleaning his study—to trudge four miles in threatening weather to enjoy once again the pleasantries of Heathcliff and the other inmates of the Heights” (316). Of course, Worth’s use of the word “pleasantries” here is sarcastic, as the people Lockwood meets at the Heights are anything but pleasant. Nonetheless, Lockwood walks four miles “through heath and mud” until he “arrived at Heathcliff’s garden gate just in time to escape the first feathery flakes of a snow shower” (Brontë 7). Though Lockwood claims to be relieved by the chance to separate himself from the business of the city, upon arrival to the country, he is immediately desperate for company, so much so that he goes out of his way to seek out the company of someone who clearly does not want it.

When he arrives at the Heights for the second time, Lockwood pounds on the great door, but is welcomed only by yowling dogs. He writes in his diary, “‘Wretched inmates!’ I ejaculated mentally, ‘you deserve perpetual isolation from your species for your churlish inhospitality. At least, I would not keep my doors barred in the day time’” (Brontë 7). In his frustration, Lockwood contradicts himself: while he claimed to crave and respect the solitude of the countryside in the first chapter, here he refers to it as a punishment for inhospitality. In his frustration, Lockwood accidentally reveals that his description of himself as a reserved man bored of city life was more of a role he was playing than an accurate description of his true nature. The contrast between Lockwood and Heathcliff not only highlights Lockwood’s poor judgment and incorrect opinion of himself, but also reveals that he does not belong in the story he stumbles upon. Despite

increasing evidence to the contrary, Lockwood holds on to the belief that he is as well suited to this desolate landscape as Heathcliff.

Part of the reason Lockwood misreads the people he meets at the Heights is that he is a naïve outsider. Lockwood takes for granted that the routine civility of city life will still apply out in the country. This assumption comically blinds him to any cue that this is not the case. Upon entering the Heights for the second time and seeing young Catherine, he waits for her to invite him to sit, but she ignores him. In an attempt to make small talk, Lockwood comments, “Rough weather!” But Catherine still ignores him. He continues, “I’m afraid, Mrs. Heathcliff, the door must bear the consequence of your servants’ leisure attendance: I had hard work to make them hear me!” (Brontë 8). Lockwood attempts to make small talk with young Catherine, a courtesy he was denied by Heathcliff upon his previous visit. He also complains about the servants’ inattention to the door, assuming and expecting that their responsibilities would be the same as those in the city. Graeme Tytler observes how Lockwood has “long taken it for granted that servants are not only a necessary part of everyday life but an indispensable luxury” (327). As will be discussed further in Chapter III, Nelly’s role at the Heights and the Grange extends beyond her duties as servant, but Lockwood sees her only as a tool to entertain and to attend to him during his stay in the country. Lockwood takes for granted that his familiar routines will apply everywhere, so much so that he is unable to adapt to different circumstances. He is unable to accurately understand the people at the Heights because they don’t fit into his preconceived understanding of the way people should behave.

When young Catherine ignores Lockwood's attempts to begin a conversation about the weather, he changes subject to compliment one of the large dogs, which had yowled at his earlier knocking. But he fails again to inspire small talk from Catherine:

"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 observes scornfully.

Unluckily, it was a heap of dead rabbits. (Brontë 8-9)

Here Lockwood acknowledges Heathcliff and Catherine's lack of polite hospitality, but he continues to comically misread his surroundings. Lockwood is such a foreigner to these surroundings that he cannot recognize the difference between kittens and dead rabbits.

Lockwood continues to smile through this awkward situation, failing to recognize the numerous cues to leave. When Heathcliff finally appears, Lockwood claims to be relieved "from [his] uncomfortable state" though Heathcliff only creates more tension in the room with his savage tone that "revealed a genuine bad nature" (Brontë 9-10). Lockwood admits that he "no longer felt inclined to call Heathcliff a capital fellow" (Brontë 10). Still, Lockwood maintains his optimistic mood. When Heathcliff, Hareton, Young Catherine, and he sit down to tea, Lockwood tries to guess who is married to Cathy. He calls her a "beneficent fairy" despite her rude behavior (Brontë 11). He first wrongly guesses that Cathy must be married to Heathcliff, who mocks Lockwood both for his wrong guess and for his choice of description. Next he guesses Hareton, a

selection that, by the reactions of his company, somehow seems more wrong than the first guess (Brontë 11). Even when Lockwood begins to recognize the rudeness of his hosts, he continues to misjudge his surroundings. In his article, “*Wuthering Heights*: Narrators, Audience, and Message,” Allan R. Brick writes, “Intrepidly Lockwood rattles off one misinterpretation after another about the identity of the people in *Wuthering Heights*” (81). These descriptions from the novel prove that Lockwood is unable to grasp the identities of his hosts at the Heights. As Brick observes, “Finally he comes to a dim awareness, if not an admission, that he has stepped into a land and a dwelling which are thoroughly incomprehensible, where none of his mundane methods of perception will apply” (81). Even when Lockwood seems to grasp his mistaken assumptions by commenting on Heathcliff and young Catherine’s rude behavior, he still continues to rely on the habits and assumptions he learned from the city.

The reader may at first think that the significance of the opening chapters would be to introduce us to the protagonist, Heathcliff. However, McCarthy observes how readers are made to “realize that we are learning nothing of Heathcliff at all. Heathcliff remains opaque as Brontë shows us the transparency of her narrator” (52). Rather than allowing Lockwood to accurately characterize the tenants of *Wuthering Heights*, Brontë characterizes Lockwood through the way he describes the other characters. In his first description of Heathcliff, Lockwood claims to “know by instinct” that Heathcliff’s “reserve springs from an aversion to showy displays of feeling” (Brontë 5). This assumption about Heathcliff is destroyed by Heathcliff’s impassioned speeches throughout the novel, but Lockwood himself hints that the reader should not share this assumption. He admits, “No, I’m running on too fast: I bestow my own attributes over-

liberally on him” (Brontë 5). This rare bit of self-awareness on Lockwood’s part affirms the fact that we learn more about Lockwood from his descriptions of others than we do about the person he describes.

When Lockwood returns to the Grange, he quickly becomes desperate for more company. He writes, “What vain weather-cocks we are! I, who had determined to hold myself independent of all social intercourse, and thanked my stars that, at length, I had lighted on a spot where it was next to impracticable—I, weak wretch, after maintaining till dusk a struggle with low spirits and solitude, was finally compelled to strike my colours” (Brontë 26). Here Lockwood seems to surrender his claim that he is reserved and introverted. He gives in to his longing for small talk by requesting that Nelly sit with him while he eats his supper, “hoping sincerely she would prove a regular gossip” (Brontë 26). After trying and failing to coax conversation out of his neighbors, Lockwood turns to the housekeeper for information and small talk.

Nelly stays and talks to Lockwood about Heathcliff and Catherine’s history for a good while until she becomes embarrassed for having chatted for so long. Lockwood attempts to convince her stay and continue her story. He says, “Are you acquainted with the mood of mind in which, if you were seated alone, and the cat licking its kitten on the rug before you, you would watch the operation so intently that puss’s neglect of one ear would put you seriously out of temper?” Nelly replies, “A terribly lazy mood I should say.” But Lockwood argues,

“On the contrary, a tiresomely active one. It is mine, at present, and, therefore, continue minutely. I perceive that people in these regions acquire over people in towns the value that a spider in a dungeon does over a spider in a cottage, to their

various occupants; and yet the deepened attraction is not entirely owing to the situation of the looker-on. They *do* live more in earnest, more in themselves, and less in surface, change, and frivolous external things. I could fancy a love for life here almost possible; and I was a fixed unbeliever in any love of a year's standing." (Brontë 49)

Lockwood is so captivated by the story that Nelly is telling him that he does not want her to neglect a single detail. However, instead of attributing this to his own desire for gossip, he makes a larger claim about the difference between city life and country life. He claims that people who live in the country are more inclined to value the "little things in life," using the spider as a metaphor. He takes this even further to say that this is an inherent trait of those who live in the country and not merely due to "the situation of the looker-on" (Brontë 49). In other words, the prisoner in Lockwood's metaphor would appreciate the spider even if he were in a cottage instead of a prison because he is inherently inclined to appreciate details more than someone who lives in a town. This reveals that Lockwood has a romanticized view of country life. He adopts stereotypes of the Romantics, envisioning peaceful pastoral life. This passage clearly reveals more about Lockwood than it does about people who live in the country, as Nelly calls his mood "lazy." Nelly is "puzzled" by his speech, saying, "Oh! here we are the same as anywhere else, when you get to know us" (Brontë 49). Nelly knows that her world does not fit into these romantic stereotypes.

Lockwood continues to stereotype the characters in Nelly's story throughout the novel. He sorts them into categories like villain, hero, and damsel in distress, as if Nelly's story were a romantic novel. In a moment of boredom, Lockwood muses, "Why

not have up Mrs. Dean to finish her tale? I can recollect its chief incidents, as far as she had gone. Yes: I remember her hero had run off, and never been heard of for three years; and the heroine was married” (Brontë 71). Frangipane argues that Lockwood’s use of the words *hero* and *heroine* to describe Heathcliff and Catherine reveal his inability to recall their names, suggesting that he could not possibly have remembered Nelly’s narrative word for word as he claims. Carl R. Woodring, by contrast, argues that Lockwood uses this language to disguise his interest in Nelly’s story with an aloof attitude toward it (300-301). We have seen that Lockwood has a misguided view of himself. It seems consistent with his character that he would paint himself as someone more detached than he is. As for the hint at Lockwood’s faulty memory, we must suspend our disbelief when it comes to Lockwood remembering all that Nelly tells him. Of these two interpretations of this line, I am inclined to side with Woodring, but a third interpretation of this line is most likely. Lockwood’s use of the words *hero* and *heroine* to describe Heathcliff and Catherine reveal his desire to simplify these characters into romantic stereotypes in order to make Nelly’s story more entertaining. McCarthy writes, “for Lockwood it is a ghost story, and *Wuthering Heights* remains rustic and bizarre to the end. For us, it is essential to see that *Wuthering Heights* is not merely a Gothic novel, but it is interesting to realize that for Lockwood it is” (50). Lockwood views Nelly’s story as an entertaining romance more than an actual account of real people’s lives. For this reason, Lockwood adapts Nelly’s narrative into a gothic romance within his own imagination, and he casts Heathcliff and Catherine in the *roles* of hero and heroine for the romantic tale he is constructing in his own mind from Nelly’s narrative.

Lockwood's romantic tendencies cause Brick to compare Lockwood to Isabella Linton. He writes, "Like Lockwood, who began by thinking Heathcliff 'a capital fellow,' Isabella finds him an irresistible hero; stubbornly, despite all warnings, she imposes the Byronic clichés upon him, closing her eyes to actual facts and behaving like her idea of a heroine" (Brick 84). Isabella becomes infatuated with Heathcliff, leading her to run away with him against her brother's wishes. Only after they are married does she finally come to recognize Heathcliff's violent character. Heathcliff hatefully mocks Isabella for "picturing in me a hero of romance and expecting unlimited indulgences from my chivalrous devotion. I can hardly regard her in the light of a rational creature, so obstinately has she persisted in forming a fabulous notion of my character and acting on the false impressions she cherished" (Brontë 118). Lockwood is almost equally guilty of making Heathcliff a romantic hero as Isabella. Just as Isabella plays the role of a romantic heroine to make herself a suitable match for her imagined hero, Lockwood attempts to play the role of a reserved recluse when he moves temporarily to the country.

The difference between Lockwood and Isabella is that, beyond his own role-playing, Lockwood does not allow his fancies to dictate his actions. Isabella allows her romantic idea of Heathcliff to influence her decision to elope with him. Similarly, near the end of the novel, Lockwood imagines himself rescuing young Catherine from her desolate environment. He writes, "What a realization of something more romantic than a fairy tale it would have been for Mrs. Linton Heathcliff, had she and I struck up an attachment, as her good nurse desired, and migrated together into the stirring atmosphere of the town!" (232). This reflection by Lockwood reveals both his desire for a good story and the disconnection between the story he imagines and the reality he experiences. In

his imagination, he believes he should fulfill the role of romantic hero who rescues the damsel in distress from her “dreary life” (Brontë 232). However, unlike Isabella, Lockwood makes no attempt to make his fantasies come true. Instead, he is content with entertaining the idea in his imagination only.

Lockwood eventually leaves the Grange to return to London. After being gone several months he returns to hear that Heathcliff has died. He writes that Nelly “furnished me with the sequel of Heathcliff’s history” (Brontë 236). Lockwood refers to the continuation of Nelly’s story as a “sequel” as though she is providing him with the second installment of a romantic novel. His language reveals that he continues to view Nelly’s account as a romance. The novel ends with Lockwood as he visits the graves of Catherine, Edgar, and Heathcliff. Lockwood’s ending is his last attempt to control the narrative, to fit the story that he is not a part of into his expectations of it. He writes, “I lingered round them, under that benign sky; watched the moths fluttering among the heath and hare-bells; listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass; and wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth” (258). Lockwood leaves the narrative satisfied. McCarthy argues that this ending proves that “Lockwood comes and goes in ignorance” (60). The way Lockwood ends the novel suggests that “it is unthinkable for him that death should not mean rest, because death means the end. Catherine, Heathcliff, and Edgar are at peace because the story is over” (McCarthy 63). Lockwood opts for normalcy and peace at the end of his narrative because, as McCarthy observed, for Lockwood the story is over, wrapped up with a nice, tidy conclusion. His ending “would seem to dismiss the ‘idle tales’ of the local peasants” (McCarthy 61). When Lockwood leaves the country, he also leaves behind his desire for

an entertaining story. It was entertaining to believe in heroes and ghosts while he stayed at Thrushcross Grange, but he has no interest in those ghosts following him as he leaves the story. This reminds us that Lockwood never had any real relationship with any of the characters. When he leaves, the characters he leaves behind are as real to him as characters in a novel.

Frangipane questions how faithful Lockwood's recounting of Nelly's narrative could be to her original. Though Lockwood claims to remember Nelly's narrative word for word, Frangipane argues that it would be impossible for him to do so, and therefore, "the only possible conclusion is that he is making up the details, filling in for ones that he cannot possibly remember" (31). However, while I agree that it is unrealistic that Lockwood could remember every word that Nelly tells him, it is also unbelievable that Lockwood made up the story on his own. I have shown how Lockwood is comically incapable of understanding the people he meets at the Heights, so he would be incapable of making up the story Nelly tells him in which she deftly characterizes them as real people. At least as far as he is concerned, Lockwood *retells* Nelly's narrative as a romance. The difference in perspective between Nelly and Lockwood's narration forces us to suspend our disbelief and trust that Nelly's narration is in her own words. Lockwood is "foppish and sentimental" with an "incapacity for insight" (Brick 85). This is not the kind of man who could have written this novel from his own imagination. However, he is exactly the sort of man who would listen to Nelly's story with rapt attention and enthusiasm. Brontë needed her framing narrator to be "a sociable and more than normally curious character" (Worth 317). For her framing narrator, Brontë needed someone who would be "*willing* to listen" to Nelly's story (Brick 810).

From the opening paragraphs of the novel, the reader is taught not to trust Lockwood's opinions of himself and others. This leads McCarthy to speculate that "Lockwood is almost a study in ineptitude, an object lesson in how not to read *Wuthering Heights*" (52). Lockwood perceives the characters of *Wuthering Heights* as romantic stereotypes, but because his lack of good judgment has already been established, the reader should know not to trust Lockwood's estimations. Because of this, we must turn to Nelly to learn about the people at the Heights. As will be demonstrated in Chapters II and III, Nelly's narration reflects complicated people and relationships rather than superficial caricatures of heroes and heroines. She is able "to keep an awareness of the virtues and failings of each [character] in her mind" (McCarthy 58). Lockwood continues to simplify her story in his imagination into easily digestible, satisfying entertainment.

Lockwood and Nelly tell two different versions of Heathcliff's story in *Wuthering Heights*. Nelly recounts an accurate account of the lives of real people, whom she has grown up with and served her entire life. Lockwood adapts Nelly's narrative into a gothic novel in his imagination. In Lockwood's mind, Heathcliff is a romantic hero and young Catherine is a typical damsel in distress. This truth is revealed in the way Lockwood incorrectly characterizes the people at the Heights. Rather than pay attention to the actual evidence before him, he continues to think of them as heroes and heroines in his the story he concocts in his mind. The tension between Lockwood's fantasies and Nelly's narrative prove that the narratives are distinct, created by the two separate characters.

One of the most striking differences between Nelly's narrative and Lockwood's imagined interpretation of it is the way love is expressed in each. Nelly describes how Catherine confided to her that she loves Heathcliff because "he is more myself than I am" (Brontë 63). This line defines the intimate connection between love and identity in the narrative that Nelly tells. Catherine doesn't simply love Heathcliff; she feels that she *is* Heathcliff, that they share an identity. This explains the depth of betrayal Heathcliff experiences when Catherine chooses to marry Edgar. Because Lockwood lacks a solid grasp of the identities of himself and others, he is incapable of giving, receiving, or understanding the kind of love Heathcliff and Catherine share. Lockwood replaces fancy for real passion; therefore, his "melodramatic language pretends to the passion that Heathcliff genuinely feels" (Berlinger 187). McCarthy observes that "in a novel where love equals identity, where being involved is the essence of any emotion, Lockwood is seen as a moral nonentity, and throws splendidly into contrast the loves of the other characters" (56). Lockwood's expectations for the story Nelly tells him are constantly being thwarted. Brontë concocted a character for her framing narrator who would never have been able to be involved in the story he records.

As we have seen, Lockwood "believes that he understands the characters and their actions on just a first impression" (Shunami 460). And not just on a first impression, but literally at first glance. The small bit of background information we get from Lockwood is his description of what drove him to escape the city in the first place. He explains how he became infatuated by "a most fascinating creature: a real goddess" (Brontë 5). He confesses that his admiration for this woman was only manifested through unnoticed glances and was not expressed "vocally," but he claims that "if looks have language, the

merest idiot might have guessed I was over head and ears” (Brontë 5). However, when she finally returns his flirtatious glances with “the sweetest of all imaginable looks” he feigns disinterest out of fear (Brontë 5). While Catherine experiences such a deep connection with Heathcliff that she feels their identities merge into one, Lockwood expresses admiration merely by superficial looking. Because of this contrast, his attempts to flirt with young Cathy are thwarted. When he stares at her, she stares back in a “cool, regardless manner,” which Lockwood deems “exceedingly embarrassing and disagreeable” (Brontë 8). Beth Newman interprets Lockwood’s “looking” as an example of the male gaze, and she describes young Catherine as someone who defies this gaze by returning it. She writes, “Catherine is doubly a ‘looker’—both an attractive woman (the modern colloquial sense of the word) and someone who looks back. Spectator as well as spectacle, she disturbs Lockwood’s pleasure in gazing” (Newman 1032). Lockwood objectifies Cathy through description, saying that she has “an admirable form, and the most exquisite little face that I have ever had the pleasure of beholding” (Brontë 9). But Lockwood’s “pleasure in beholding” is cut short by her defiant scorn. And because his admiration for her cannot be realized in reality (both because of her defiance and because of his fear), he turns to Nelly for a “history” of the “pretty girl-widow” (Brontë 27). For Lockwood, Nelly’s narrative “becomes a means of satisfying his desire to gaze at her, becomes a substitute, a metaphor, for the pleasure of looking” (Newman 1033). For Lockwood, “looking” is a substitute for real relationship, and when his looking is interrupted, he settles for listening.

Nelly herself is unable to escape Lockwood’s imagination. When he is unable to acquire the information he seeks first-hand from Heathcliff and young Catherine, he

seeks out the housekeeper. Lockwood is aware that as a domestic servant, Nelly would have access to the private lives of the people she serves, the exact kind of information he desires. Like Heathcliff and Catherine, Lockwood also translates Nelly into an important role in his novel: He concocts Nelly's role as narrator. He writes,

Mrs. Dean came.

"It was twenty minutes, sir, to taking the medicine," she commenced.

"Away, away with it!" I replied; "I desire to have—"

"The Doctor says you must drop the powders."

"With all my heart! Don't interrupt me. Come and take your seat here.

Keep your fingers from that bitter phalanx of vials. Draw your knitting out of your pocket—that will do—now continue the history of Mr. Heathcliff, from where you left off, to the present day. (Brontë 71-72)

This scene shows us Lockwood establishing Nelly as the narrator of his imaginary romance. Here he goes as far as to arrange how and where she sits, even commanding her to take out her knitting. Just as he crafts Heathcliff and Catherine into his vision of romantic heroes, Lockwood carefully manipulates the interview in such a way as to make Nelly fit into his idea of what a narrator should be. He even orders her not to interrupt him, tells her where she should pick up the story, and what details she should tell him. He attempts to manipulate Nelly into telling him the story he desires. However, Lockwood's idea of Nelly as a narrator is something he is responsible for concocting and not necessarily a reflection of her actual character or role in the story. Chapters II and III will examine Nelly's narrative and roles in the story to determine whether they are an accurate representation of her character.

From what we see of Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights*, he seems unable to engage in any kind of authentic or meaningful relationship because he transforms people into romantic stereotypes and assigns them inauthentic roles. Because of this he never reaches true understanding of any character that he meets at the Heights. By relying on Nelly's narration to "know" the tenants of the Heights, Lockwood filters people through narrative and his imagination, which only gives him access to a second-hand relationship with others. As we will see in Chapters II and III, Nelly is not only an eye-witness to the events in the novel, but she is a key player with a complicated relationship to Heathcliff and Catherine that Lockwood is never able to comprehend. Newman writes that Lockwood "seeks to look again, as it were, through Nelly's eyes—that is by hearing and appropriating Nelly's story" (1033). Because Lockwood is ill equipped to engage with or even comprehend the people at the Heights, he uses Nelly to serve as his narrator, hoping she will make sense of his surroundings through narrative. However, instead of actually paying attention to the story Nelly tells, he projects his own desire for an entertaining story onto Nelly's narration, and adapts her story to suit his imagination.

III. "A REGULAR GOSSIP":

NELLY AS NARRATOR

In Chapter I, I revealed how Lockwood exposes himself as a gregarious busybody early in the novel. After his first meeting with his landlord, Heathcliff, Lockwood is desperate to know the mysterious history of Wuthering Heights. He records in his diary, "under pretense of gaining information concerning the necessities of my establishment, I desired Mrs. Dean, when she brought in supper, to sit down while I ate it; hoping sincerely she would prove a regular gossip, and either rouse me to animation or lull me to sleep by her talk" (Brontë 26). Lockwood's curiosity makes him hungry for a helping of juicy gossip about his landlord. He hopes Nelly will be a gossip, so that he may satisfy his hunger. In this chapter, I wish to reflect on the meaning of gossip and explore whether this is an appropriate categorization of Nelly's narrative.

When Nelly does sit down with Lockwood, he prompts her to tell a "leisurely story." Though, despite what Lockwood assumed about her likely propensity for gossip, Nelly seems more inclined to recount a quick history. She interrupts her story to say, "But Mr. Lockwood, I forget these tales cannot divert you. I'm annoyed how I should dream of chattering on at such a rate; and your gruel cold, and you nodding for bed! I could have told Heathcliff's history, all that you need to hear, in half-a-dozen words" (Brontë 48). Lockwood, however, is thoroughly entertained by her story and far from nodding off. He says, "do sit still, another half hour! You've done just right to tell the story leisurely. That is the method I like; and you must finish in the same style. I am interested in every character you have mentioned, more or less" (Brontë 48). With more coaxing, Nelly is persuaded to sit awhile longer, but she suggests skipping some of the

story, presumably to get to more relevant information later on: “You must allow me to leap over some three years; during that space Mrs. Earnshaw—” She is cut off by Lockwood who says, “No, no, I’ll allow nothing of the sort!” (Brontë 48). Lockwood stops her, begging to hear every intimate detail in between. It is clear Lockwood desires a long, detailed story, not the bullet points of Heathcliff’s life.

Graeme Tytler discusses servants’ propensity for gossip in his article, “Masters and Servants in *Wuthering Heights*.” He observes how the servants at the Heights and the Grange are “behind a good many of the reports and rumours that make up parts of Nelly Dean’s narrative” (322). For example, after Isabella runs away from Heathcliff to give birth to their child, Heathcliff asks Nelly for her location; Nelly explains to Lockwood, “Though I would give no information, he discovered, through some of the other servants, both her place of residence and the existence of the child” (142). Later in the novel, when Nelly is employed at Thrushcross Grange, she explains that if Zillah, another housekeeper, had not filled her in about the goings on at the Heights she would have “hardly know[n] who was dead, and who living” (222). Tytler uses these example and others to claim that the fact that “servants are much given to gossip both loyal and disloyal is evident” in the novel (Tytler 322). However, Lockwood seems to notice that there is something different about Nelly and her thoughtful narrative.

Lockwood persuades Nelly to continue her story by continuing to assure her that he is entertained by her story and by complimenting her on her distinction from her class. He says, “you have no marks of the manners that I am habituated to consider as peculiar to your class. I am sure you have thought a great deal more than the generality of servants think. You have been compelled to cultivate your reflective faculties, for want

of occasions for frittering your life away in silly trifles” (Brontë 49). Perhaps Lockwood is referring to the way Nelly is not immediately given to gossip as he assumes she would be as a housekeeper. Whatever Lockwood means by this observation of Nelly, she seems to be flattered by it, saying,

I have undergone sharp discipline, which has taught me wisdom; and then, I have read more than you would fancy, Mr. Lockwood. You could not open a book in this library that I have not looked into, and got something out of also: unless it be that range of Greek and Latin, and that of French; and those I know one from another: it is as much as you can expect of a poor man’s daughter. (Brontë 49)

Nelly has experience in the art of storytelling and so knows how narratives are spun. It is likely that she imitates this style in her own narration. She says, “if I am to follow my story in true gossip’s fashion, I had better go on; and instead of leaping three years, I will be content to pass to the next summer” (Brontë 49). This is the only time in the novel that Nelly refers to her own narrative as gossip. Her tone sounds tongue-in-cheek as though she is amused to find Lockwood so eager to know more about the people at the Heights, but it is here that she actively accepts her new role of storyteller.

In order to better be able to judge the appropriateness of categorizing Nelly’s narrative as gossip, it is beneficial to understand the history of the word *gossip*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the act of *gossiping* as “to talk idly, mostly about other people’s affairs; to go about tattling” (“Gossip, v.”). It defines *a gossip* as “a person, mostly a woman, of light and trifling character, esp. who delights in idle talk; a newsmonger, a tattler” (“Gossip, n.”). Two things to note about these definitions are that gossip can be both a verb, something that someone does, and a noun, what someone *is*.

And that by definition a person who engages in gossip, or a person who is *a gossip*, is usually a woman.

Though these are the definitions that are most commonly used, the word *gossip* comes from the Old English *godsibb*, which is a person “who has contracted spiritual affinity with another by acting as a sponsor at a baptism” (“Gossip, n.”). In other words, a *godsibb*, which would later evolve to a *gossip*, was someone close to a family like a godparent or “a familiar acquaintance, friend” (“Gossip, n.”). We can infer from this progression of definitions how the meaning of gossip evolved over time. Its etymology makes sense, as all gossip must begin with someone who is closely acquainted with the desired information. Someone who gossips about another must be well enough acquainted with them to be familiar with the private details of their lives. The closer the person is to someone, the juicier their gossip would be. In fact, gossip would not exist at all if it did not begin with someone close enough to the person being gossiped about. If we consider the progression of definitions, it also makes sense that gossip as a way of providing or obtaining information about other people would develop into a primarily feminine mode of discourse.

Erin M. Goss discusses gossip specifically in the context of the nineteenth-century by analyzing its uses in Jane Austen’s and Jane West’s novels. In her article, “Homespun Gossip: Jane West, Jane Austen, and the Task of Literary Criticism,” she observes that the definition we most often think of for gossip (a tattling woman) “emerge[s] only in the late sixteenth century, after the word has been around for five hundred years. Gossip thus carries with itself the history of its own marginalization; once the name of an official and even sacramental addition to a family structure, it came to be the marker of a denigrated

and specifically feminine form of discourse that is, at best, useless” (Goss 167).

Markman Ellis contributed a chapter to the anthology, *British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth-Century*, in which he details how the tea-table is “an embodied metaphor for gossip” (Ellis 87). He writes, “the tea-table is a speaking space, closely embedded in the practices of conversation, talk and debate. That debate has been characterized as unimportant and frivolous, excluded from the rational and critical by being scapegoated as gossip” (Ellis 87). Though gossip around the tea-table was an important mode of communication amongst eighteenth-century women, it has been historically dismissed as a trivial and unreliable method of information. Thus gendering and devaluing the word “gossip” belittles women’s voices and opinions in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century. Ellis explains how using the word *gossip* “codes women’s talk as ephemeral, frivolous, false, and destructive,” suggesting that the lives of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women are easily dismissible (Ellis 84).

As these sources show, there are many definitions and connotations associated with the word *gossip*. Kristen A. Pond, a scholar of nineteenth-century literature, offers a simplified definition, in her article, “Harriet Martineau’s Epistemology of Gossip,” saying that though “gossip can be defined in many ways, it can most simply be called talk about others” (180). If the definition of gossip is simplified to the basic act of talking about other people, then Nelly is unquestionably a gossip because she spills the intimate details of others’ lives to Lockwood. However, it is unrealistic to strip this word of its many negative connotations, and ignoring these connotations can allow the continuation of harmful influences on the way we perceive and categorize modes of thought and communication.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an influential literary scholar and theorist, writes in her essay, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” that the “role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored” (1086). However, this role of literary texts is continually “disregarded in the reading of nineteenth-century British literature” leading to the “continuing success” of dominant modes of thinking because they continue to be “displaced and dispersed into more modern forms” (Spivak 1086). In other words, literature has the power to shape culture, so by overlooking this function of literature, dominant ideologies can slip past the reader and influence their thinking. Spivak uses imperialism as her example. She begins her essay by arguing that “[i]t should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England’s social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English” (Spivak 1086). Imperialism was a pivotal piece of England’s cultural identity in the nineteenth-century, but present day readers unversed in literary theory and the historical context of a novel might not recognize this underlying ideology in a text, and therefore are susceptible to being influenced by potentially harmful subtexts. In this way, damaging aspects of nineteenth-century culture can continue to exist in the present.

Similarly, Pond points out that our perception of gossip has not grown since the nineteenth-century. She explains that because gossip is “still viewed as a feminine mode of talk and noted more for its titillating focus on scandal than as a form of serious social critique,” our interpretation of novels containing gossip has not evolved (Pond 190). According to Pond, the way we perceive gossip today is almost identical to the way nineteenth-century people perceived it. Lockwood assumes that Nelly will be “a gossip”

because of her gender and class, and by categorizing her narrative as gossip, he invites readers to view it with all the negative connotations attached to that word. Whether or not explicitly influenced by Lockwood's use of the word *gossip*, literary scholars have consistently suspected Nelly's reliability as a narrator and attached to it the same negative connotations that accompany gossip. Contemporary critical perspectives of Nelly mirror the odd contradictions in the perceptions of gossip that were present in the nineteenth-century. Pond explains how conduct books of the time "reveal the paradoxical view of gossip as they marvel at the power of gossip, while at the same time referring to it in belittling terms" (189). Ellis writes, "gossip has been routinely derided as both inconsequential and destructive, frivolous and corrupting, though how it can be both at once is unclear" (81). Similarly, critics of *Wuthering Heights* perceive Nelly's narrative as either incompetent or conniving. Many critics are suspicious that Nelly deceives Lockwood either through ignorance of her effect on the events at the Heights or by cunningly manipulating the narrative. For example, Gideon Shunami's paper, "The Unreliable Narrator of *Wuthering Heights*," most obviously reflects the contradicting perspectives associated with gossip. He writes that Nelly's "sanctimonious position results from an ignorance of her true role and a misunderstanding of the spirit of others. She is therefore incapable of recognizing the fact that her decisions bring about the tragic crisis of the novel" (457). Shunami contradicts this statement a few pages later by claiming that Lockwood is "merely being manipulated by the cunning Nelly" (460). He suggests that Nelly deftly manipulates Lockwood's understanding of her story both to position herself in a role of sympathy in the story and to encourage his romantic interest in young Cathy. Though he does not reference gossip specifically, Shunami's claims

about Nelly's narration echo the negative and contradicting perspectives that accompany this method of narration.

Critics who belittle Nelly's narrative argue that she is incapable of comprehending the story she tells. James Quinnell argues that Nelly's "self-proclaimed common sense masks misunderstanding" of the events she narrates (198). As a result, he believes "Nelly hinders rather than helps our understanding of the characters of the story" because her narrative is tainted by her own misguided opinions (Quinnell 200). John K. Mathison writes, "Nelly is an admirable woman whose point of view, I believe, the reader must reject" (107). He believes that a "good-natured" person like Nelly lacks an "understanding of life and human nature," leaving it to the reader to "provide his own version" of the story (Mathison 107). Shunami claims that "Nelly lacks the qualities and qualifications necessary for her to a reliable narrator" (449). Just as gossips have been historically deemed trivial, these critics do not trust Nelly's perspective to be accurate or important for its own sake.

Shunami and James Hafley take their suspicions of Nelly beyond an argument about her ineptitude to tell her story to instead accuse her of villainous deeds and deceptive intentions. James Hafley was so suspicious of Nelly that he claimed she is "one of the consummate villains in English literature" (199). Though Shunami does not take his argument this far, he does manipulate evidence from the novel to claim that Nelly is to blame for much of the tragedies in the novel. One of the first tragedies in the novel occurs when Heathcliff overhears Catherine say to Nelly that it would degrade her to marry him because of his low social status. Shunami blames Nelly for this event saying, "Immediately after Catherine's declaration, Nelly observes Heathcliff slip

outside, but says nothing about it to Catherine” (Shunami 455). It is true that Nelly does not tell Catherine right away when she sees Heathcliff run off, but at this moment, Nelly has no reason for urgency. Nelly has no reason to think Heathcliff has run farther than the barn, so she chooses not to interrupt Catherine in the middle of her speech. When Catherine is done, Nelly hints to her that Heathcliff might have heard and goes to search the barn, thinking she’ll find him sulking there. When she doesn’t find him, Nelly says, “I whispered to Catherine that he had heard a good part of what she said, I was sure; and told how I saw him quit the kitchen just as she complained of her brother’s conduct regarding him” (Brontë 65). As evident by this quotation, it is simply false that Nelly neglects to tell Catherine about Heathcliff’s eavesdropping. Hafley observes that “only when it is too late—when [Nelly’s] revelation will hurt Cathy without mending the situation—admits that he had overheard their conversation” (Hafley 206). It is true that by the time Nelly tells Catherine that Heathcliff overheard Catherine’s words, it is too late, but as we’ve seen there was no reason for Nelly to think this would be the case. It is unfair to blame Nelly for Catherine’s misfortune in this case.

In my view, Shunami misinterprets the scene when Catherine expresses her love for Heathcliff to Nelly saying, “It is probable that Nelly has already decided, for clear social reasons, that Catherine should marry the wealthy Edgar and not penniless Heathcliff. Therefore, she must do everything she can to banish the foolish love for Heathcliff from Catherine’s mind” (Shunami 456). He cites Nelly’s “personal limitations” for being responsible for her misunderstanding of Catherine’s deep love for Heathcliff. However, during this scene Nelly advises the opposite of what Shunami suggests. Nelly tells Catherine that good looks, money, and infatuation are terrible

reasons to marry someone and warns her that these things will only make her happy in the short term. When Catherine insists that she will marry Linton anyway, Nelly asks her to think about Heathcliff: “As soon as you become Mrs. Linton, he loses friend, and love, and all! Have you considered how you’ll bear the separation, and how he’ll react to being quite deserted in the world?” (Brontë 64). Nelly shows deep understanding of Catherine and Heathcliff’s relationship, and she advises Catherine not to marry Linton for trivial reasons. Though Shunami and Hafley try to blame Nelly for Catherine’s destruction, the evidence in the text proves that this is unjustified.

Shunami also blames Nelly for Isabella’s tragedy, saying, “When Nelly discovers that Isabella Linton has gone off with Heathcliff, she refrains from telling the head of the house anything in order to prevent ‘embarrassment.’ However, in this instance as well, her silence unwittingly initiates the fatal sequence leading to Isabella’s tragedy” (Shunami 457). Notwithstanding Shunami’s use of quotation marks, the word “embarrassment” is never mentioned or even implied in this scene. Isabella runs away with Heathcliff in the midst of Catherine’s illness. Nelly wishes not to “unfold the business to my master, absorbed as he was in his present calamity, and having no heart to spare for a second grief!” (Brontë 103). And when it is finally discovered that Isabella is gone, Edgar chooses not to pursue her saying that “she had a right to go if she pleased” even though she had betrayed him. This suggests that even if Nelly had not hesitated to tell Edgar about Isabella’s departure, it would have made no difference to Isabella’s fate. Catherine and Isabella bring about their own destruction. It is important to exonerate Nelly from being the cause of the tragedies at *Wuthering Heights* not only because the

text shows her blame to be unwarranted, but also because this simplifies Nelly's character.

In *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below*, Bruce Robbins warns that a simplified "black and white" reading of a narrator robs a novel of its complexity as well as makes it easy to overlook the narrator as character integral to the novel. He writes, "To opt for a 'good' character is to deny the sense of dangerous misplaced worldly power that the servant's narrative role evokes; to opt for a 'bad' character is to exaggerate it to the point where it can be condemned and dismissed" (Robbins 102-103). In the "Editor's Preface" to the 1850 edition of *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Brontë describes Nelly as wholesome, benevolent character to prove that her sister created someone virtuous in her "rude and strange production" (C. Brontë 313). She writes, "For a specimen of true benevolence and homely fidelity, look at the character of Nelly Dean" (C. Brontë 315). In the chapter, "Looking Oppositely: Emily Brontë's Bible of Hell," from *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar explain that "Nelly is benevolent because she is a nurse, a nurturer, a foster-mother...she is most often seen feeding others, carrying baskets of apples, stirring porridge, roasting meats, pouring tea. Wholesomely nurturing, she does appear to be in some sense an ideal woman, a 'general mother'" (291). Nelly's role as servant requires her to wait on and serve others making her seem motherly, benevolent, and obedient. However, Gilbert and Gubar question whether this idea of Nelly is accurate or helpful in our understanding of Nelly and her role as servant. To assume Nelly is all good as Charlotte Brontë did, is to overlook the mistakes and biases that make her a complete human character. And to assume she is all bad is to categorize her narrative as conniving and intentionally unreliable. This second perspective is what

causes many critics to argue for the need to look past Nelly's unreliable narrative in an attempt to get at the purportedly "true story" of Heathcliff and Catherine.

Despite what many critics say about her, Nelly has a shrewd understanding of the people around her. When Catherine confides that she is engaged to Edgar, Nelly's advice reveals that she does not lack the emotional depth to recognize that Catherine is not in love with Edgar. Nelly also admits her mistakes and biases to Lockwood, proving that she is aware of the way she has affected the story:

I seated myself in a chair, and rocked, to and fro, passing harsh judgment on my many derelictions of duty; from which, it struck me then, all the misfortunes of all my employers sprang. It was not the case, in reality, I am aware; but it was, in my imagination, that dismal night, and I thought Heathcliff himself less guilty than I.

(Brontë 211)

Hafley argues that this passage "is as close as Emily Brontë could have come, without violating Ellen's character as she had created it, to insisting upon the woman's real nature" Nelly's "real nature" here being her villainy (Hafley 212). Nelly is no villain, so the other way to read this admission of guilt is that Nelly's honesty and vulnerability in this speech help to strengthen her reliability as narrator. Not only is she self-aware of her role in the story, but she makes this role as clear as she can in her narration. She does not hide her biases and mistakes as critics like Shunami, Hafley, and Quinnell claim, but is upfront about them. Nelly is neither ignorant nor intentionally conniving in her narration.

Gossip: An Alternative Mode of Discourse

Categorizing Nelly's narrative as gossip risks positioning it as inadequate, conniving, or inaccurate. However, if taken seriously as a legitimate mode of discourse,

gossip actually has the power to subvert dominant Enlightenment assumptions about the certainty of knowledge. Pond writes, “As an alternative epistemology, gossip threatens the certainty that there are clear lines between reliable and unreliable forms of knowledge” (Pond 181). Though scientific knowledge is given more authority than information contrived from gossip, even scientific knowledge cannot always be correct. Pond argues that gossip

critiques an unbalanced (and arguably unethical) approach to knowledge that excludes ways of knowing that fall outside the domain of scientific, objective, and empirical knowledge forms. Through this feminized discourse, Martineau demonstrates that uncertainty plagues all kinds of knowledge and that presumptions to have access to the ‘right’ kind of knowledge are limiting and dangerous. (190)

Making assumptions about the validity of certain kinds of information while dismissing others limits the scope of possible knowledge. These assumptions also cause marginalized voices to be overlooked because they are often excluded from the dominant modes of knowledge.

For example, for men in the nineteenth-century the world had much wider horizons than for women. In the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, women were confined to domestic spaces, making the scope of their worlds much smaller and intimate than those of men. And because “the smaller our social circle the more likely we are to find gossip in action” women were most likely to engage in this form of communication within their intimate domestic circles (Goss 171). Men’s discourse concerned topics such as culture, philosophy, and politics, reflecting the scope of their world. Because

women's spaces were limited to the domestic, their discourse was also limited to domestic matters. In their introduction to *British Women's Writing in the Long Eighteenth Century: Authorship, Politics, and History*, Jennie Batchelor and Cora Kaplan explain that while men discussed public matters in public spaces, women were limited "to the confines of the domestic household" which "denied them a role in the formation of public opinion" (Batchelor and Kaplan 4). In the nineteenth-century, women were often excluded from public knowledge both in educational access and in the power to shape public opinion. For this reason, Goss argues, "To describe gossip and even implicitly defend it is to find value in the oft-derided and generally overlooked small circles in which so many—women especially, within these novels that tend so thoroughly to keep them near home—live their lives" (171). To dismiss gossip as an illegitimate mode of knowledge and discourse is to dismiss the voices of nineteenth-century women. Alternative modes of discourse that exist in small circles not only offer healthy criticism of dominant understandings of truth, but also offer to expand the capacity for knowledge.

In *Wuthering Heights*, Nelly explains how she has been, "living among the hills and seeing one set of faces, and one series of actions, from year's end to year's end" (Brontë 49). Nelly's entire world exists within and between Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. Every character in her life story is limited to the people who have lived in, worked in, or visited these homes. When Lockwood was in the city, he may not have cared to know the intimate details of strangers in the country, but when he enters the "small world" between the Heights and the Grange, he briefly becomes a member of their small social circle. He observes to Nelly how he believes that people who live in the country "acquire over people in towns the value that a spider in a dungeon does over a

spider in a cottage, to their various occupants” (Brontë 49). In other words, the spider and its web are infinitely more entertaining and valuable to a prisoner in a dungeon than they are to a person living in a cottage. The prisoner has no better way to spend their time than to watch the spider spin its web, but in a cottage, the spider and its web are nothing more than something to be swept from a ceiling corner with a broom, barely noticed. In the country, Lockwood is like the prisoner he describes, deprived of the entertainments of the city. Like the prisoner who values the spider, Lockwood assigns meaning and value to the characters and events Nelly narrates to him. However, while these characters and events are Nelly’s entire world, they are only a temporary distraction for Lockwood.

Goss argues that in Jane Austen’s novels, “gossip keeps the world small” (Goss 172). She claims that in Austen’s novels, gossip often “circulates around a social scene what that scene already knows about itself” (Goss 172). In other words, Austen’s characters don’t broaden the scope of their worlds with gossip but reinforce the preexisting truths of their small social circles. However, Goss believes that gossip has the ability to broaden the small world it blossoms in as she claims it does in West’s novel, *A Gossip’s Story*. She argues that Jane West “uses [gossip] to provide a form of pushing against the limits placed upon one’s social sphere, a way perhaps to expand one’s world or at least protest its circumscription” (Goss 172). In *Wuthering Heights*, Nelly uses gossip to expand her world’s population by one. By sharing her story, she not only adds Lockwood to her limited social circle, but she pushes against the confines of her role as servant by claiming her master’s story as her own.

Pond uses Martineau's novel, *Deerbrook*, to show how gossip subverts dominant discourse, but Martineau also wrote many non-fiction works of sociology. Pond compares and contrasts Martineau's social theories in her non-fiction with her representation of discourse in her novel. For example, in her book, *How to Observe Morals and Manners*, Martineau writes, "An observer, to be perfectly accurate, should be himself perfect. Every prejudice, every moral perversion, dims or distorts whatever the eye looks upon" (Martineau 51). In other words, in order for a narrator to provide perfectly objective and accurate information, they would need to be free of any prejudices, biases, or moral ambiguity. Pond also quotes this line from Martineau's book, responding, "This is not possible, as Martineau acknowledges, but an awareness of prejudice can offset the shortcomings of the observer" (Pond 185). It is impossible that any person be free of prejudice or bias and by extension that any observation be free of interpretation of some kind. Because of this, the closest we can get to reliable or accurate information is to become aware of our own prejudices and consider how they influence our interpretations. Pond points out that "One such prejudice is the unquestioned reliance on empirical methods as the surest way to accurate observations" (185). In other words, if we are interested in accurate information, we must call into question our assumptions about what constitutes accurate information. By making gossip a legitimate mode of communicating information, novels like *Deerbrook* and *Wuthering Heights* are able to "encourage a different way of perceiving the world that moralists find dangerous, not least because they challenge the categories of knowledge established and guarded by those in power" (Pond 186). If we consider gossip as a serious mode of discourse, we are acknowledging that there is no "truth" that is absolutely certain, but recognize that there

are many ways of “telling” the truth, and these may have different interpretations and effects.

In fact, perhaps it is a mistaken assumption that it is possible to have a completely reliable first-person narrator at all. Goss argues that, in a way, all “narrators emerge as gossips, transmitters of information about those fictional others who uninvited (and uninviteable) either to confirm or deny the details a narrator provides a reader about them” (167). By definition, narrators cannot narrate without “gossiping” about others. If an unreliable narrator is defined as someone who has biases connected to the story that could skew their narration, then all first-person narrators would be unreliable because no one is without biases. People perceive and define everything from literary texts to emotions, language, history, and morality through a veil of interpretation, and this veil is woven tightly with innumerable threads, each of which further shrouds what people tend to think of as “truthful” or “authentic.”

Such a view comports with philosophical and literary theories associated with the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, who argued that every “truth” is already an interpretation. In his essay, “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense,” Nietzsche explains how words are arbitrarily linked to the objects they describe. He writes, “We believe that when we speak of tree, colours, snow, and flowers, we have knowledge of the things themselves, and yet we possess only metaphors of things which in no way correspond to the original entities” (144). In other words, there is nothing about a written or spoken word that has any inherent connection with the thing it describes. However, Nietzsche explains that over enough time and with continued use, a word eventually “acquires the same significance for all human beings, as if it were the only necessary image and as if that

relation of the original nervous stimulus to the image produced were a relation of strict causality” (149).

Fredric Jameson also believes that interpretation dictates what we recognize as truth or reality. Referring specifically to literary works, he writes, “we never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read; we approach them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations” (Jameson 9). Interpretation is entrenched in the way we define our reality. Different interpretations build upon each other, creating a thicker and thicker wall between our perception and the original. This wall of interpretation is permanent and impenetrable. Jameson also points out that even if we are reading a text for the first time, we still perceive it “through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions” (9). No text can come to us authentically even if we are experiencing it for the first time because even as we read we are simultaneously reacting, judging, and making assumptions, thereby distancing ourselves from any chance of experiencing something free from interpretation. However, the idea that something “true” is being buried by interpretation, is also misleading. Given the illusory nature of language and other concepts we take for granted, it is clear that the text itself is full of interpretation and layers of assumptions. When we understand that every thought we have, down to the individual words we use, is a mere interpretation of the world, the importance of critical thought and analysis is clear. Our tendency to idealize truth and authenticity sets up a false negative connotation for interpretation. This idealization separates truth and interpretation, making interpretation the enemy of authenticity. Idealizing the idea of an “authentic text” that is mediated by our foreign interpretation is

problematic and misleading because even literal readings of a text are another sort of interpretation of what the text is saying.

If everything is interpretation, then Nelly's narration is her interpretation of the events she witnesses at the Heights and the Grange. Her narrative is full of her personal biases, contradictions, and imperfect morality. McCarthy makes the point that it is Nelly's "very involvement in the action, which colors and distorts her narrative. She has her own preferences, or her own reasons, and her account of events past is a subtle control of our sympathy" (57). McCarthy considers how Nelly's biases could affect the way readers perceive characters and events in the novel. For example, she argues that Catherine "is rarely ever presented in a favorable light" because of Nelly's dislike of her (57). However, McCarthy ultimately shows how Nelly is able to "keep an awareness of the virtues and failing of each in her mind" and that this is reflected in the way she presents the characters in her narrative (58). While Lockwood simplifies characters into romantic stereotypes, Nelly is capable of complex thinking. And if it is precisely this complexity that is valued in the text, then the fact that Nelly's narration is her own interpretation of the events provides us with insight into Nelly's perception of reality for its own sake. There is value in uncovering unreliability as it exposes contradictions and makes the reader think more critically about the information they receive from a narrator. It is unfortunate that so many critics of *Wuthering Heights* have been reluctant to value the contradiction, biases, and opinions in Nelly's narrative for their own sake. Nelly is a gossip and an unreliable narrator. The mistake is to use these categorizations to suggest that Nelly's opinions hinder our understanding of the story at the Heights. Instead, Nelly's perspective is the story of *Wuthering Heights*. In the next chapter, I will explore

Nelly's roles and relationships in the novel to attempt to prove that Heathcliff and Catherine's story *is* Nelly's story.

IV. “MY HISTORY”:

NELLY AS PROTAGONIST

Nelly’s role as a domestic servant makes her perfectly suited to be the narrator of *Wuthering Heights*. This role gives her access to the knowledge Lockwood seeks about Heathcliff, but playing this role is a complicated human character who is not defined by the roles she plays. In the first part of this chapter, I would like to make the distinction between Nelly the servant and Nelly the person. Though Nelly undeniably plays the role of servant in *Wuthering Heights*, she consistently resists this role throughout the novel. When Nelly is viewed as a well-rounded character in the novel rather than a flat caricature of a servant, the blurred line between Nelly’s roles and relationships is revealed. When these complicated relationships are taken into consideration, it becomes clear how intimately Nelly’s story is wrapped up with Heathcliff and Catherine’s.

Nelly the Servant

Through Lockwood, the reader first meets Nelly as the housekeeper of Thrushcross Grange. Lockwood introduces her as “the housekeeper, a matronly lady, taken as a fixture along with the house” (Brontë 7). Rather than a human person, she is introduced as a mere household object. The second time Lockwood mentions Nelly he refers to her again as “my human fixture” (Brontë 26). As Lockwood’s description reveals, servants were viewed as barely-personified objects of the household, basically “human furniture.” In response to Lockwood’s description of Nelly, Gilbert and Gubar write,

there is, indeed, a durable thinglike quality about her, as if she had outlasted the Earnshaw/Linton storms of passion like their two houses, or as if she were a wall,

a door, an object of furniture meant to begin a narration in response to the conventional sigh of ‘Ah, if only these old walls could speak, what stories they would tell.’ Like a wall or fixture, moreover, Nelly has a certain impassivity, a diplomatic immunity to entangling emotions. Though she sometimes expresses strong feelings about the action, she manages to avoid taking sides—or, rather, like a wall, she is related to both sides. (290)

Servants were treated like things, tools, and furniture. The role of domestic servant linked the identity of the servant to the house in which they served. The novel is called *Wuthering Heights*, after the house where much of the events of the novel take place. What better character to tell the story of this house than the character whose identity is built into the house itself? When Lockwood first enters *Wuthering Heights*, he notices a “huge fireplace” and a “vast oak dresser” among other notable furnishings (Brontë 4). Nelly “comes with the house” in the same way these integral items of furniture might. Servants gave up their individual human identities to become part of the house they serve in.

In an earlier chapter, “The Queen’s Looking Glass,” Gilbert and Gubar explain that society’s ideal for women in the nineteenth-century was for them to be domestic, quiet, and docile. This standard was not only a character trope in literature of the time, but an impossible expectation for women in real life. Gilbert and Gubar speculate that the “domestic angel” standard for women was so severe in the nineteenth-century that women were often alienated from their own humanity by trying to meet it. In order to meet this angelic ideal, women had to sacrifice their own human emotions and desires. Gilbert and Gubar cite Wolfgang Lederer’s book, *The Fear of Women*, in which he

observes how women have historically concealed their own human nature through dress and makeup in order to be more valuable to men. He writes, “women, to appeal to man, will try, except at the early height of physical perfection, to conceal her nature, to be not transient bloom but eternal art. From the Paleolithic on, we have evidence that woman, through careful coiffure, through adornment and make-up, tried to stress the eternal type rather than the mortal self” (Lederer 42). Throughout history, women have been held to unnatural standards and inhuman ideals that pressure them to suppress and conceal their natural human identities. Gilbert and Gubar argue that women in the nineteenth-century committed a figurative suicide in order to become domestic angels. They explain how “the aesthetic cult of ladylike fragility and delicate beauty—no doubt associated with the moral cult of the angel-woman—obliged ‘genteel’ women to ‘kill’ themselves (as Lederer observed) into art objects: slim, pale, passive beings whose ‘charms’ eerily recalled the snowy, porcelain immobility of the dead” (Gilbert and Gubar 24-25). In order to meet nineteenth-century ideals of beauty and domesticity, women had to sacrifice their natural, human qualities inside and out. Women were expected to suppress their emotions, intelligence, and ambitions in order to be beautiful, passive objects to adorn domestic spaces.

Though domestic servants were not expected to be domestic angels like their mistresses, a similar kind of figurative suicide was built into the role of domestic servant. The servant was expected to sacrifice her own identity by remaining invisible in the corners of the room only to serve others. If housewives were expected to “kill themselves into art objects,” servants were expected to kill themselves into household tools to be

used by their masters. The truth of this is demonstrated by Lockwood's description of Nelly as a fixture of the house she serves.

Nelly expresses both her role as servant and her connection to the house she serves most clearly when she is sent away from the Heights after Catherine's marriage to Edgar. She says, "Much against my inclination, I was persuaded to leave Wuthering Heights and accompany her" to Thrushcross Grange (Brontë 70). Nelly is reluctant to leave the Heights, and yet she obeys her master. When Nelly first begins her narrative to Lockwood, it is years after she has been staying at the Grange with Catherine and Edgar. Lockwood asks whether the Earnshaws are "an old family," and Nelly replies, "Very old, sir; and Hareton in the last of them, as our Miss Cathy is of us—I mean, of the Lintons" (Brontë 28). While Nelly's identity was once intimately linked to the Heights, this shifts after she serves at the Grange, leading her to think of herself as one of the Lintons rather than the Earnshaws. This highlights how the role of servant shaped the identity of the person playing this role.

Because of the servant's lack of identity and association with the house itself, Nelly's role as servant gives her the opportunity to witness Heathcliff and Catherine's otherwise private moments. Always at the margins of the room, servants could be almost as invisible as wallpaper. The whole novel is an example of Nelly's ability to witness the lives of Heathcliff and Catherine. She is present for the everyday moments in the household, witnessing the lives of those she serves unfolding day by day. She also witnesses particularly private moments such as Heathcliff's first visit with Catherine after his disappearance to supervising young Catherine and Linton's visits later in the novel. One key example of a private moment Nelly is present for is Heathcliff and Catherine's

last moments together before Catherine's death. This is arguably one of the most intimate scenes in the novel between Heathcliff and Catherine, and Nelly witnesses it first-hand. Nelly describes how Heathcliff enters Catherine's room, "in a stride or two [Heathcliff] was at her side, and had her grasped in his arms. He neither spoke nor loosed his hold for five minutes, during which period he bestowed more kisses than ever he gave in his life before, I daresay: but then my mistress had kissed him first, and I plainly saw that he could hardly bear, for downright agony, to look into her face!" (Brontë 123). Despite Nelly's presence, Heathcliff and Catherine embrace and shower each other with affection as if they are alone. Nelly explains that when Heathcliff speaks to Catherine, he does "not seek to disguise his despair" (Brontë 123). It is clear that Nelly's presence does not interrupt Heathcliff or Catherine from expressing themselves intimately. Nelly is permitted to witness private moments between Heathcliff and Catherine because she occupies a space reserved for domestic servants. Because of her role as domestic servant, Nelly is connected to the lives of those she serves intimately, so intimately that the private moments of Heathcliff and Catherine are also Nelly's own private moments.

Nelly the Person

Nelly's role as servant helps to shape her relationships with the people and events in her narrative, but it does not define them. There are many contradictions and nuances to Nelly's identity. These nuances are what make her a well-rounded, believable, human character.

Nelly's relationship with Hindley, Catherine, Heathcliff, and their children later on in the novel is twofold. The most obvious role the reader sees Nelly play in the novel

is that of domestic servant, but her relationship with these characters extends beyond this role. Nelly tells Lockwood how she grew up with Hindley, Catherine, and Heathcliff, sharing meals and playing together like foster siblings. She describes how one day “Mr. Earnshaw, the old master, came down-stairs, dressed for a journey; and, after he had told Joseph what was to be done during the day, he turned to Hindley, and Cathy, and me—for I was eating my porridge with them” (Brontë 28-29). Mr. Earnshaw asks Hindley and Cathy to name the gifts they want him to bring them, and Nelly says, “He did not forget me; for he had a kind heart” and promised to bring her “a pocketful of apples and pears” along with a fiddle for Hindley and a horse whip for Catherine. Though Nelly’s gift is humbler than Hindley’s and Catherine’s, Mr. Earnshaw includes her as though she is a friend to his children rather than the daughter of a servant. Nelly also eats her porridge with Catherine and Hindley instead of in the kitchen with the other servants. Later in the novel, Nelly becomes nursemaid to Hindley and Catherine’s children. Nelly expresses motherly fondness for young Catherine and Hareton. When visiting the Heights after ten months at the Grange, Nelly sees a “brown-eyed boy setting his ruddy countenance against the bars” of the front gate. She says, “Further reflection suggested this must be Hareton, *my* Hareton, not altered greatly since I left him.” She cries out “God bless thee, darling!” and when he does not seem to recognize her, she says, “Hareton, it’s Nelly! Nelly, thy nurse.” (Brontë 85-86). Later, Nelly tells Lockwood that the twelve years of young Catherine’s childhood “were the happiest of my life” (Brontë 146). She says that Catherine “was the most winning thing that ever brought sunshine into a desolate house” (Brontë 146). Both young Catherine and Hareton grow up without a mother, so Nelly

fills this role. Given this context, it is clear that Nelly's role as servant does not encompass the complexity of her relationship with the Earnshaws and their children.

In her article, "Odds, Ends, and Others: Objects and the Narration of Woolf's Servant Characters," Monica J. Miller provides insight on the role of domestic servants. Though she looks at Virginia Woolf's novel, *The Years*, Miller's article also provides insightful commentary on the role and relationships of domestic servants, which ring true with Nelly's position in *Wuthering Heights*. She helps to articulate the nuances of Nelly's identity by exploring the contradictions and sense of liminality that are built into the role of servant. For example, Miller explains how the domestic servant "linger[s] in a liminal position between presence and absence" (112). This accurately articulates the position Nelly occupies at the Heights and the Grange. Her role as servant allows her to be both present and absent, noticed and unnoticed, granting her access to the private lives of those she serves. Miller also explains the "the servant both inhabits and is excluded from the family home" (116). This applies literally to Nelly as she is a part of the families she serves at the same time she is an outsider. Though she does play the role of domestic servant, this role does not define the entirety of Nelly's relationships with the other characters in the novel. Instead, there are two sides of Nelly's relationship to those she serves: part domestic servant, part family member, Nelly's relationship with Heathcliff and Catherine extends beyond either individual role.

Nelly's close relationship with Catherine and Heathcliff often provide her with access to their private thoughts. More than witness, Nelly is also confidant. Catherine and Heathcliff seek her help, advice, and approval as though she were an older sister rather than a mere servant. In fact, Nelly's "total involvement in the lives of the

Wuthering Heights household leads even Heathcliff to pour out his heart to her”

(McCarthy 53). For example, Heathcliff shockingly confides to Nelly how he dug up Catherine’s grave the night she was buried. He says, “Being alone, and conscious two yards of loose earth was the sole barrier between us, I said to myself—“I’ll have her in my arms again!” He describes how he dug until his shovel scraped the coffin lid, stopping only because he believed he encountered Catherine’s ghost. He confides,

I knew no living thing in flesh and blood was by; but, as certainly as you perceive the approach to some substantial body in the dark, though it cannot be discerned, so certainly I felt that Cathy was there: not under me, but on the earth. A sudden sense of relief flowed from my heart through every limb. I relinquished my labour of agony, and turned consoled at once: unspeakably consoled. Her presence was with me: it remained while I re-filled the grave, and led me home.
(Brontë 221)

Besides Catherine, Nelly is Heathcliff’s only friend at the Heights. He is either abused by or an abuser of every other character living in both the Heights and the Grange. It is Nelly only that he can confide in when Catherine is gone.

One of the most memorable secrets confided in Nelly in the novel is Catherine’s confession that she loves Heathcliff and yet has accepted Edgar Linton’s proposal. Once she accepts the engagement, Catherine’s secret love for Heathcliff weighs on her unbearably, leading her to exclaim to Nelly that her secret worries her and that she “must let it out!” She confesses to Nelly,

It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now; so he shall never know how I love him: and that, not because he’s handsome, Nelly, but because he’s more myself

than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same; and Linton's is as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire. (Brontë 63)

As her trusted confidant, Nelly is the most intimate source of information about Catherine's inner thoughts and feelings.

Though Nelly is permitted at the edge of the room in private moments like a traditional servant, there is a significant difference in how Nelly exists in this space. Miller also writes that servants were "silent witnesses to their mistresses' seemingly private moments" (116). Nelly is trusted to receive private information and to be present for private moments like a traditional servant, but she is not invisible as Miller or Gilbert and Gubar suggest. Because of her role as domestic servant, Nelly is indeed permitted to witness the private moments of others, but Nelly is *not* silent. Nelly has a voice during the intimate moments of others. For example, when Catherine tells Nelly about her engagement to Edgar, she is seeking much more than a silent sounding board. Catherine seeks Nelly's advice and approval of her decision. She says to Nelly, "I want to know what I should do. To-day, Edgar Linton has asked me to marry him, and I've given him an answer. Now, before I tell you whether it was a consent or denial, you tell me which it ought to have been" (Brontë 60). Not only does Catherine trust Nelly with her secrets, she is desperate to know Nelly's opinion. She says, "I *shall* marry him: and yet you have not told me whether I'm right" (Brontë 62). Catherine implores Nelly to validate her choice. She relies on Nelly to steady her uncertainty. This suggests that the relationship between Catherine and Nelly is closer than that of mistress and servant.

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the exchange between Heathcliff and Catherine before Catherine's death to show how Nelly is allowed to be present during private moments, but as this scene unfolds, Nelly's presence is acknowledged by both Catherine and Heathcliff, proving that she is not merely a silent witness. Catherine upsets Heathcliff by casually talking about how she is dying, so he when he ceases to give her attention, Catherine turns to Nelly. She says,

“Oh, you see, Nelly, he would not relent a moment to keep me out of the grave.

That is how I'm loved! Well, never mind. That is not my Heathcliff. I shall love mine yet; and take him with me: he's in my soul. And,” added she musingly, “the thing that irks me most is this shattered prison, after all. I'm tired of being enclosed here. I'm wearying to escape into that glorious world, and to be always there: not seeing it dimly through tears, and yearning for it through the walls of an aching heart: but really with it, and in it. Nelly, you think you are better and more fortunate than I; in full health and strength: you are sorry for me—very soon that will be altered I shall be sorry for you. I shall be incomparably beyond and above you all. I *wonder* he won't be near me!” She went on to herself. “I thought he wished it. Heathcliff, dear! you should not be sullen now. Do come to me, Heathcliff.” (Brontë 125)

In the midst of this private moment Catherine is aware and concerned with how Nelly is judging the situation. Miller writes that female domestic servants functioned as “half-noticed springboards for introspection” (115). At the edge of the room, servants functioned as a thing to talk at rather than someone to talk to. At first, Catherine seems to use Nelly for this end, to monologue about Heathcliff and her miseries without

addressing him directly. However, the second time Catherine addresses Nelly in this speech, she acknowledges Nelly's presence much more directly. Nelly even indicates through her narrative whether Catherine is speaking to her directly or using her as a mere sounding board. Nelly specifically says that Catherine speaks "musingly," in the beginning of the passage suggesting that she is using Nelly as a way to express her introspection aloud rather than speaking to her directly. Then at the end of the passage Nelly indicates a change in Catherine's tone saying, "she went on to herself." If Catherine had been simply using Nelly as an object to use as a soundboard for her introspection during this monologue, Nelly would not have needed to indicate her change in tone. Catherine shows a familiarity with Nelly's personal feelings toward her, suggesting that Nelly is more than a marginal object to be talked at. In the middle of this intimate exchange between Catherine and Heathcliff, Catherine addresses Nelly directly, acknowledging that she is aware of Nelly's presence and does not perceive her as a mere item of furniture in the room.

Perhaps the most compelling piece of evidence in the novel that Nelly's role extends beyond servant comes from Nelly herself. When it is discovered that Heathcliff has run away from the Heights in response to Catherine's heartbreaking words, Catherine spends the night outside in the rain where she develops a fever. She is sent to stay at the Grange to recover from her sickness. When she returns to the Heights, Nelly explains, "From that period, for several months, she ceased to hold any communication with me, save in the relation of a mere servant" (Brontë 70). Catherine resents Nelly for Heathcliff's disappearance even though it was her own words that sent him away. But

the fact that Nelly notices the difference in Catherine's interactions with her proves that their relationship usually extends beyond that of mistress and servant.

Nelly's Story

Nelly's close relationship to Heathcliff and Catherine may make her seem like the perfect person to tell their story. Lockwood correctly assumes that Nelly will be a good source of information because of the insider knowledge that comes along with being a domestic servant, but what Lockwood cannot understand is that the narrative Nelly tells is as much her own story as it is Heathcliff and Catherine's. Nelly's complicated, layered relationships to the people she serves intimately links these character's identities, making Nelly's story inseparable from the story of Heathcliff and Catherine.

As I have discussed, the role of servant requires a loss of individual identity in favor of an intimate connection with the house and family that they serve. Even though Nelly resists this loss of identity by maintaining power over her own opinions, morals, the role of servant does limit the scope of her independent life. Miller writes, "The servant thus occupied a paradoxical position: she blended so thoroughly into the unified household that she lacked an independent identity, and yet at the same time, as the outsider within, she stood for the differences that threatened the household's unity" (Miller 115). This insight harkens back to Gilbert and Gubar's thoughts on sacrificed identity. The role of domestic servant requires Nelly to give up an independent life or identity from those she serves. In his article, "Masters and Servants in *Wuthering Heights*," Tytler observes that Nelly "lives vicariously through her employers rather than to lead a life of her own, let alone cherish ambitions of any kind" (325). Though Nelly's relationships with those she serves do extend beyond her role as servant, her identity and

personal life do not extend beyond these relationships. In other words, the experiences and characters that make up Nelly's life are those of the events and people at the Heights and the Grange. She has an independent identity, but this identity is linked intimately to those she serves.

Miller provides insight on the intimate connection between mistresses and their servants. She writes that "employees frequently serve as mirrors in which [the mistress] can catch sight of her character, enabling the sort of self-examination that is in large part self-construction" (Miller 116). The parallel between Catherine and Nelly is evident both in the roles they play in the household and on an almost spiritual level with their identities. When Catherine is ill, she looks over to see herself and Nelly in a mirror and gives this astonishing speech: "'Ah! Nelly has played traitor,' she exclaimed, passionately. 'Nelly is my hidden enemy. You witch! So you do seek elf-bolts to hurt us! Let me go, and I'll make her rue! I'll make her howl a recantation!' A maniac's fury kindled under her brows" (101). It is significant that Catherine accuses Nelly's reflection in the mirror. Mistress and servant mirrored each other's identities. One could not exist without the other: domestic angel relies on her servant to keep up her role as mistress of the house, and a servant would only be such with a mistress to serve. We have previously exonerated Nelly from being held accountable for the tragedies in the novel. It has been shown the tragedies of Catherine and Isabella are the results of their own choices, not a result of Nelly's actions. With this in mind, this scene between Catherine and Nelly, reveals not Nelly's villainy, but marks Catherine's warped realization of her own undoing. Because Nelly mirrors Catherine's identity back to her, she is able to recognize

her downfall in Nelly where she can't recognize it in herself. This scene highlights how Nelly's identity is connected to Catherine's.

Sandra Petronio, a professor of communication and medicine, discusses the ways people manage their private information in her book, *Boundaries of Privacy*. She develops the theory of Communication Privacy Management (CPM), which provides insight on the blurred lines between Nelly, Catherine, and Heathcliff's identities. She writes, "unlike previous research on 'self' disclosure, CPM assumes that others are also central to discerning the tension between being public and private" (2). In other words, when considering private information, we cannot consider the individual who disclosed the information alone. We must also consider the way this "decision affects other people" (Petronio 2). Unless one focuses on only the experiences a person has when they are completely alone, it is impossible to isolate a person's experiences, or life story, from that of the people around them. Petronio writes, "Privacy has importance for us because it lets us feel separate from others. It gives a sense that we are the rightful owners of information about us" (1). However, because Nelly is so intimately involved in the private lives of Heathcliff and Catherine, this "separation of self," or the boundary where one person's identity ends and the other's begins, is unclear.

Petronio explains that when one person shares private information with someone, they "set into motion a need for boundary coordination because there is an expected guardianship of the information often assumed by both the discloser and recipient" (Petronio 11). In other words, the recipient of another's personal information is expected to use discretion and is responsible for keeping the shared information private. Catherine and Heathcliff trust Nelly as their confidant, and Nelly betrays this trust when she retells

the personal details of their lives to Lockwood. According to Petronio, there is an implied trust and confidentiality when private information is disclosed to another. However, when Catherine seeks Nelly's blessing of her choice to marry Edgar, Nelly does not indulge her. She says, "trouble me with no more secrets: I'll not promise to keep them" (Brontë 65). Catherine begs, "You'll keep that?" And Nelly repeats, "No, I'll not promise" (Brontë 65). In the second part of the novel, Nelly breaks a promise to keep a secret for Cathy. She "walked straight from her room to his, and related the whole story: with the exception of her conversations with her cousin, and any mention of Hareton" (Brontë 195). Nelly does not take responsibility for the privacy of other's personal information. This suggests that she considers herself to be a "rightful owner" of this information. Because of her connection to the identities and lives of those she serves, their private lives overlap with Nelly's private life.

Nelly's intimate connection to the lives of her superiors mirrors the spiritual link between Catherine and Heathcliff. Catherine says this about her relationship with Heathcliff:

My great miseries in this world have been Heathcliff's miseries, and I watched and felt each from the beginning: my great thought in living is himself. If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger: I should not seem a part of it (Brontë 64).

Though Catherine makes this speech, these sentiments could apply to Nelly as well.

Nelly shares in Heathcliff and Catherine and Edgar's miseries as if they are her own.

Nelly's role as domestic servant ties her story more intimately to the characters in her life

because she is able to occupy an intimate space that not even family members or close friends would occupy. Out on the moors it is almost like everything else in the world has perished. Nelly's life exists between the two estates on the moors isolated from all except their tenants. Because of Nelly's intimate connection with Heathcliff and Catherine, their story *is* Nelly's story.

Without Catherine being her own first-person narrator, Nelly is the closest we can get to knowing her inner thoughts and feelings. And while we are on the subject, Catherine could not be the sole narrator of *Wuthering Heights* for the obvious reason that she dies halfway through the novel. Though Brontë could have chosen to allow Catherine to narrate parts of the novel, Catherine does not have as much access to enough characters and is not as present for as much of the plot as Nelly is. Through Lockwood, Brontë even introduces Catherine's diary, leaving open the possibility that Lockwood record the story of *Wuthering Heights* from her journal instead of through Nelly's narrative. After a storm necessitates that Lockwood spend the night at the Heights, he finds Catherine's childhood library. He describes how nearly every margin in the well-worn books were filled with sketches and notes, some of which "took the form of a regular diary" (Brontë 16). Lockwood explains how "An immediate interest kindled within me for the unknown Catherine, and I began, forthwith, to decipher her faded hieroglyphics" (Brontë 16). The next two pages of this chapter consist of an excerpt from Catherine's diary, which Lockwood records in his own journal. From Lockwood's description, it sounds like there would be enough information to piece together much of Heathcliff and Catherine's story without having to rely on Nelly's perspective. However,

Brontë does not choose to tell the story through this means. This suggests that Brontë was more interested in presenting Nelly's perspective than Catherine's.

If Lockwood had been as similar to Heathcliff as he first thought in the opening paragraphs, he would not have been interested in listening to Nelly's story. By extension, it can be inferred that Heathcliff himself would not have been equipped to play Lockwood's role in the novel. Furthermore, Heathcliff would also not be equipped to play Nelly's role. Heathcliff is unsuited to be the first-person narrator of *Wuthering Heights* for several reasons. The first, and arguably most significant, reason is that he would have no inclination to tell his story. Heathcliff is a taciturn recluse. There is no doubt that the man who "winces" at Lockwood's mere polite greeting would not readily narrate a novel's length work about his love life to a stranger. In her article, "I am Heathcliff": Lockwood's Role in *Wuthering Heights*," Manette Berlinger argues that Lockwood's intuition was right when he guessed that "he and Heathcliff conceal certain emotions," but wrong about the different ways they do express them (188). While "Lockwood cannot confess his love to his paramour, he voices his sentiments profusely to others" and "Heathcliff, by contrast, when not provoked, limits his words with everyone but Nelly, but passionately declares his love to Cathy" (Berlinger 188). When Lockwood becomes attracted to a young woman from afar, he is unable to express his feelings verbally. Heathcliff does not share this struggle. He expresses his emotion to Cathy with "violent intensity" (Berlinger 188). Whereas Lockwood is incapable of expressing emotions intimately, Heathcliff is only willing to express himself intimately. For this reason, Heathcliff would have no desire to share his personal story whether with Lockwood or with an audience of readers. Therefore, making Heathcliff the first-person

narrator of the novel would be inconsistent with his character. Heathcliff's willingness to narrate his personal story would, if not completely rob him of his reserved and mysterious nature, seriously call it into question. This would create a contradiction in Heathcliff's identity, and in a novel that is so focused on identity, making Heathcliff narrator would go as far as to threaten the integrity of the novel.

Heathcliff's point of view is also much more limited than Nelly's. For example, he leaves Wuthering Heights for three years during which Catherine marries Edgar Linton. Nelly does not give many details about what transpired with Heathcliff during those three years because she admits, "I don't know how he gained his money; neither am I aware of the means he took to raise his mind from the savage ignorance into which it was sunk" (Brontë 72). Instead, the information Nelly provides about these three years is mostly about her own situation. She explains how Hindley and Edgar persuade her to move to Thrushcross Grange with Catherine and Edgar after their marriage. This transition marks a shift in Nelly's employers from Hindley Earnshaw to Edgar Linton, who trades "munificent wages" for her move (Brontë 70). She also describes her grief at having to leave baby Hareton at the Heights with his father, Hindley. She says, "I've no doubt he has completely forgotten all about Ellen Dean, and that he was ever more than all the world to her and she to him!" (Brontë 71). It is telling that Brontë decides to include these details about Nelly's situation and personal feelings in the novel instead of Heathcliff's adventures away from Wuthering Heights. There are times when Brontë chooses to bring in other narrators to fill in the gaps in Nelly's story. For example, Nelly reads Lockwood a letter she received from Isabella Linton, in which Isabella describes her abusive marriage to Heathcliff. As mentioned earlier, Zillah, another housekeeper,

also fills Nelly in on the events at the Heights when Nelly is living at the Grange.

However, Brontë does not bother to use either of these strategies to answer how Heathcliff made his fortune. This suggests that Nelly's experiences are more central to the novel than Heathcliff's fortune seeking.

There is further evidence in the text to suggest that Nelly is the protagonist of *Wuthering Heights*, and it lies in the narrative structure of the novel itself. For evidence that *Wuthering Heights* is actually Nelly's story, let us return to the beginning.

Lockwood prompts Nelly for nearly two pages with questions about his neighboring landlord, hoping she'll take the bait and provide him with entertaining details. However, he is disappointed when Nelly does not elaborate on her answers. Lockwood asks her for details about the Earnshaws who lived at Wuthering Heights and about the Lintons who lived at Thrushcross Grange before him. Nelly returns his questions with short answers, seeming to be uninterested in elaborating about these characters. After an awkward pause, Lockwood worries that he will not be able to obtain gossip from the housekeeper. He writes, "She was not a gossip, I feared; unless about her own affairs, and those could hardly interest me" (Brontë 26). However, though Lockwood claims to be uninterested in Nelly for her own sake, it is precisely with her own affairs that she finally begins her narrative:

Before I came to live here, she commenced—waiting no farther invitation to her story—I was almost always at Wuthering Heights; because my mother had nursed Mr. Hindley Earnshaw, that was Hareton's father, and I got used to playing with the children: I ran errands too, and helped to make hay, and hung about the farm ready for anything that anybody would set me to. (Brontë 28)

Nelly does not begin her narrative with Heathcliff or the Earnshaws or the Lintons, but with her own history. She tells Lockwood how she came to Wuthering Heights, her role in the house, and her relationship to its tenants. She explains how she ate and played with Catherine and her brother, Hindley, when they were children, revealing that she is more like a foster sister than a servant. By both asking for Heathcliff's history and claiming to be uninterested in Nelly, Lockwood makes the mistake of assuming that Nelly's "affairs" are separate from those of Heathcliff, the Earnshaws, and the Lintons' affairs. Lockwood asks for the history of his landlord, but to Nelly, Heathcliff's history is inseparable from her own, so she begins by talking about herself. Lockwood assumes that Heathcliff is the protagonist of Nelly's story. However, I believe the narrative structure proves that the novel is not really about Heathcliff. If Emily Brontë had wanted to tell the story of Heathcliff and Catherine, she would not have filtered it through two different narrators.

In Chapter I, I discuss how because of Lockwood's poor judgment, the reader learns more about Lockwood through his descriptions of others than they do about the characters he describes. McCarthy observes that in the beginning of the novel "when the author might be expected to be sketching in a few important details, Brontë is deliberately keeping the picture blurred" (51). Throughout the novel, Brontë consistently chooses to provide Nelly's perspective rather than getting Heathcliff and Catherine's story directly from the source. I have outlined reasons as to why Heathcliff and Catherine may have been problematic narrators for the novel either due to the construction of their characters or to the time of their deaths, but in actuality, Brontë could have worked around these issues using diary entries, letters, or using multiple

narrators. I have shown how all of these strategies are used in *Wuthering Heights* to fill in the gaps of Nelly's narration, but interestingly Brontë chooses not use these strategies to allow Heathcliff and Catherine to be the first-person narrators of *Wuthering Heights*. The important thing to notice is not that Heathcliff or Catherine could not have been narrator, but that they easily could have been, and yet Brontë decided against it.

Nelly refers to her own narrative as "my history" later in the novel. She pauses her narration when she hears the doctor, Kenneth, come in to see Lockwood. She says, "here is Kenneth; I'll go down, and tell him how much better you are. My history is *dree*, as we say, and will serve to while away another morning" (Brontë 121). In response to Nelly's words, Lockwood records in his journal, "Dree, and Dreary! I reflected as the good woman descended to receive the doctor: and not exactly of the kind which I should have chosen to amuse me" (Brontë 121). Even Lockwood recognizes that the story Nelly has to tell is not the gossip he was hoping for. Though he asks for a history of Heathcliff, he ends up hearing Nelly's own history.

V. CONCLUSION

The narrators of *Wuthering Heights* tell two different stories: Nelly tells her own story about complicated relationships, and Lockwood adapts it into a conventional romantic tragedy in his mind. In Chapter II, I argue that because everything that is read or experienced is filtered through a person's biases, individual perspectives are always influenced by interpretation. I urge readers to pay attention to Nelly's interpretation of events for its own sake rather than continuing the debate about whether her interpretation is a reliable or unreliable account of Heathcliff and Catherine's life. However, I argue in Chapter I that the reader should be suspicious of Lockwood's interpretation of Nelly's story. In other words, listening to Nelly requires one to doubt Lockwood, as these two narrators are effectively telling different stories, but why should we pay greater attention to Nelly's point of view rather than Lockwood's?

As I discussed in Chapter I, Lockwood's perspective is influenced by clichés and his desire to be entertained. Lockwood copes with his inability to understand his surroundings by relying on stereotypes and adapting Nelly's narrative with his imagination to fit his own agenda. Brontë also provides hints throughout her novel that she did not intend for her readers to interpret her novel as Lockwood does. I show how Lockwood comically misreads his surroundings and the people he encounters at the Heights. Brontë created a foppish narrator to urge her readers not to follow his example. If she had wanted to create the kind of romantic novel Lockwood wanted Nelly's narrative to be, Brontë could have chosen Heathcliff or Catherine to be the narrator of her novel. Instead, Brontë chose Nelly to be her narrator. This suggests that *Wuthering*

Heights was not meant to be a mere romance. Indeed, it is in part a critique of the traditional gothic romance.

In Chapter III, I discuss Nelly's identity and role in the novel in terms of her relationship with Heathcliff and Catherine. Having grown up with one generation at the Heights and helped to raise the next, Nelly is as close as family to the residents of the Heights and the Grange. Nelly's role as servant allows her to share in Heathcliff and Catherine's private lives even more than most family members would. Nelly is not merely the narrator, but is a complicated, human character who is a part of the story she tells as much as Catherine and Heathcliff are. Because of the intimate relationship she shares with Heathcliff and Catherine, *Wuthering Heights* is Nelly's story. Within her narrative, there are complex human relationships rather than Lockwood's clichés. For this reason, readers of *Wuthering Heights* should find more value in Nelly's perspective than Lockwood's.

However, because Nelly's narrative is transcribed in Lockwood's journal and Lockwood sees Nelly as a servant, her role in the novel itself mirrors the marginal position of servant. As narrator, Nelly is both absent from and present in the story as a character in her own right. Because Lockwood perceives Nelly as a mere servant, it is only fitting that Nelly lies in the margins of Lockwood's narration, but it is important that we see past this placement of Nelly so we don't dismiss one of the novel's most important characters as Lockwood does. Nelly exists only at the margins of the story from Lockwood's point of view. For every other character she is a confidant, actor, victim, or scapegoat; that is to say, she is far from marginal or objective. Nelly is invested in the story as one of its chief characters. McCarthy writes that Lockwood's

“inability to be involved is what distinguishes Lockwood from Nelly Dean, the other narrator of the novel. Nelly is forever involved and committed. The story of Heathcliff and Catherine is, in a way, her own life story” (56). Lockwood does not affect the actual happenings at the Heights as Nelly does, but he does have power to manipulate her narrative to seem as though it’s not really about her. Because of Lockwood, Nelly lives at the outer edges of her own narrative. However, the evidence I have provided in this thesis suggests that *Wuthering Heights* is Nelly’s story more than it is Heathcliff and Catherine’s.

Just as servants were overlooked in the room, Lockwood overlooks Nelly as a character who has a story of her own to tell. However, neither her role in the text nor her role as domestic servant represents the true nature of her relationships and roles in the story. Lockwood is actually responsible for making it seem like they do. Lockwood sees Nelly as a servant. In fact, “for Lockwood she remains a mere servant to the end” (McCarthy 53). Because Lockwood simplifies people into caricatures, “Nelly is much more than he is ever capable of seeing” (McCarthy 53). The insider knowledge and her chattiness that Lockwood assumes would accompany the role of servant make her the perfect narrator for Lockwood. However, there is more to Nelly than Lockwood realizes, and the story he receives from her is not exactly the one he asks for.

It is only through Lockwood that Nelly is able to tell her story. Lockwood plays the role of both audience and publisher for Nelly’s narrative. Carolyn Steedman believes that Nelly “makes Lockwood her amanuensis, or mere secretary: a kind of servant who writes down her long tale” (Steedman 201). In fact, she goes as far to say, “Personally, I have always thought that Lockwood was written to be dispensed with” (Steedman 206).

Though it is true that Lockwood's narration should be taken as seriously as Nelly's, Lockwood's influence on the narrative should not be ignored. Indeed, Lockwood is vitally important to the story because if he hadn't been there to listen, Nelly would have had no means to tell her story or had an audience to listen if she did. Lockwood is also Brontë's vital hint to readers that *Wuthering Heights* should not be read as a conventional romance. Heathcliff is no romantic hero and Nelly is no mere servant. Though *Wuthering Heights* has the appearance of a gothic romance, Lockwood indicates to readers that it cannot be read in the conventional way. We must see Nelly as the active teller of her own story, and Lockwood as the necessary audience to listen. In the margins of Heathcliff and Catherine's story, we find Nelly's experience as a female domestic servant in the nineteenth-century, and it is time we listen to what she has to say.

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