Lit is Life Question #1: What do we do with passion?

Study Guide for Emily Bronte’s **Wuthering Heights**

**Classics SEAR us as they…**

**S**timulate thought

**E**ntertain

**A**lign all elements to convey a message

**R**elate to our lives

As you read, notice how the author engages your head and heart, as you consider passion’s place in our lives.

**Passion as Romance**—How important is a soul mate? If soul mates exist, where do I get one? Is passion paramount in finding and living with Mr./Mrs. Right? What makes a satisfying relationship?

**Passion as Temperament**—I tend to be more realistic or romantic by nature? Am I ruled by my head or heart? Or to borrow from Nietzsche, do I pay homage to Apollo, god of intellect, order, and reason, or to Dionysus, god of passion, freedom, release? Is my personality a help or hindrance in my relationships?

**Passion as Revenge or Righteous Anger**—Is there a thin line between love and hate? Are Heathclliff’s actions based on moral contempt or base revenge? Is revenge ever justified? Is it ever sweet?

**Passion vs Codependency**—Are Catherine and Heathcliff peerless lovers to be emulated or codependents to be cured?

**Author as Artist**

**How does Bronte align each element to the theme?**

**Plot:** Is the plot predictable? Is the ending satisfying? Which couples find true love?

**Character:** Are the characters worthy of concern? Which relationships are healthy? Which couples are soul mates?

**Point of View:** Why did Bronte use two narrators to tell the story? Which characters does Nelly prefer and dislike? Is she a reliable, objective narrator? Does she speak for Bronte or is the author more of a romantic?

**Setting:** How does the Romantic setting of Wuthering Heights and the Classical setting of Thrushcross Grange complement the characters who feel “at home” in each place? Where do healthy relationships reside? Did Bronte favor one temperament over the other?

To give you a jumpstart:

The story begins with the first narrator, Lockwood, paying a visit to Wuthering Heights. He hopes to meet his new landlord and neighbor, Mr. Heathcliff. His reception is anything-but-friendly as he steps into a mysterious, haunted, volatile household. Returning home to Thrushcross Grange, the new home he has rented, he asks his housekeeper, Ellen Dean, to shed light on the strange inhabitants of Wuthering Heights.

Always ready to gossip, Ellen begins her saga with Heathcliff’s adoption at the age of four into his new home, Wuthering Heights, and new family, the Earnshaws. Tangled with the story of the Earnshaws is the story of the Lintons, the family who previously owned the very house in which Lockwood now lives. Near the end of the novel, Nelly’s flashback will end and the action of the story will return to the beginning of the book where Lockwood enters the story.

**High Protein for Your Inner Nerd: Author’s Life/Times**

Emily Bronte (181-1848) lived her entire life on the lonely moors of Yorkshire, England. Growing up without a mother, she and her now-famous sisters, Anne and Charlotte, had a rich fantasy life, much like the March sisters in Alcott’s Little Women. More introverted in life but passionate on the page than Charlotte, author of Jane Eyre, Emily wrote poems but only one novel. As Albert Guerard says in his *Preface* to *Wuthering Heights*:

But the one great novel, whatever compensation it may have meant for life unlived, was a remarkable representation of life deeply understood…She nourished rather than fought her introspective bent, and so achieved an intense awareness of inward conflict…She who had seen so little of the wide world wisely narrowed her stage to two isolated houses and a moor thus assuring a stronger attention to the interior drama.

Like Romeo and Juliet, these “two households” have between them enough bad blood to rival that of the Capulets and Montagues. The difference lies in the fact that both lovers are of the same house, Wuthering Heights. What threatens to separate them is a single family member and a suitor from the neighboring household and his way of life. Catherine must choose between two very opposite men, which ultimately always means choosing between two very different lives. Bronte’s work is about so much more than a love triangle.

Bronte was truly a Romantic, not only in the conventional sense, but also in a literary one. Like all literary movements, while Romanticism is designated as the period in England from 178 through 1837, it didn’t suddenly end when Queen Victoria launched a new era. And although it was the briefest period in English history, its extreme swing from classicism left an impact that continues today. Bronte’s work, written in 1847, is far more Romantic than Victorian—a period that returned to Classicicism.

Romanticism fully bloomed in England in 1798 with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge. But the climate for the movement began much earlier with key events, such as the French Revolution in 1789 and disillusionment with the Industrial Revolution. Tired of funding the extravagance of the French monarchs while starving themselves, the commoners of France revolted. While the Industrial Revolution had its advantages, the Machine Age ushered in new problems, such as overcrowded, dirty cities, leaving people longing for a reconnection with nature. As with all movements, before rebellion fully exploded it was fueled by thought, in particular, the beliefs of philosophers, like Locke and Rosseau.

Locke’s premise that we are born as a *tabula rasa* (blank slate) was foundational to the Romantic idealism that believed man is not inherently evil but naturally good. Romantics blamed society for whatever man became. They believed his environment would mold him, not an inner nature doomed with sin. This tenant led to revering the “noble savage,” one who was primitive, uncultivated, and thus uncorrupted by society—be it the native American Indian or Mary Shelley’s monster in *Frankenstein*. (Although Mary Shelley’s creature eventually murders, blame is placed on the doctor’s recklessness with and disregard for his creation and the society that rejects the monster—not with the monster himself.) Moreover, Rousseau’s “social contract” led man to expect fair treatment between the governing and the governed, thus laid groundwork for the French and American Revolutions.

Classicists value conformity and restraint; Romantics embrace free thinking and emotion. Classicists value tradition, institutions, aristocracy; Romantics champion change, individuals, the common man. Classicists bow to decorum; Romantics seek to experiment. Classicists control their feelings; Romantics unleash their passions. Classicists love the city and society; Romantics prize the country and nature. Classicists cling to the tame; Romantics are drawn to the wild—whether in nature (a classical garden is symmetrical and harshly pruned like those of Versailles; a romantic garden is free flowing and untamed) or in thinking. Classicists stick to logic and the concrete; Romantics are interested in the imagination and the supernatural. Typically, Classicists are realists, pragmatic and materialistic; Romantics are idealists, aesthetic and unmaterialistic.

What does all of this have to do with *Wuthering Heights*? Everything. The setting of the novel created by Bronte juxtaposes two opposing worldviews. Thrushcross Grange, polished and refined, houses the Neoclassical/Age of Reason set—Edgar and Isabella Linton. They are aristocratic and solid, lovers of polite society. Wuthering Heights embodies the passionate rebels—Catherine and Heathcliff. They are primitive and explosive, lovers of wild nature. Heathcliff is Bronte’s “noble savage”—more a victim marred by society than a perpetrator responsible for wrongdoing. And finally, as a Romantic herself, Bronte’s intrigue with the supernatural leaves its mark on the novel’s ending, giving us an unsolved mystery as a bonus.

Does exploring these two polar temperaments or (as suggested by right brain/left brain research) modes of thinking serve only as history lesson on contrasting literary periods? Absolutely not. Modern readers will find themselves in one of these two camps and will relate to the novel accordingly. The novel will challenge us to recognize our own personalities as predominantly one or the other. Specifically, classicists will rely on reason (resume) over passion in making a match. Romantics will pick passion (soul mate) over reason in finding a partner. Is Bronte championing one bent over the other? Or is she exposing the strengths and weaknesses of each and implying we need a marriage between reason and passion?

**A Novel Approach to Passion**

*Wuthering Heights* provides insights into many types of couples. As you read, ask yourself which are soul mates, given you believe in the concept. Which marriages work and which fail? Obviously at the center of the novel is the triangle between Catherine, Edgar, and Heathcliff. Who is her soul mate? What is a soul mate—our opposite who “completes” us or our mirror in temperament, values, interests? Does she outgrow Heathcliff? Is she drawn to Edgar solely for his money, looks, and status? If so, why does she seem content with him until Heathcliff returns? Does she enjoy the stability Edgar provides, or does he smother and bore her? Is Heathcliff right when he says Edgar can give Catherine only “duty and humanity,” that “he might as well plant an oak in a flower-pot, and expect it to thrive,” as expect Catherine to survive a dull marriage? Which man gives her what she wants? What she needs? What do we learn from her choices? Does she settle? What does it mean to settle?

And there are other couples to consider: Which characters find and hold onto true love? What is their secret? And one more thought on soul mates and romantic passion…We often say a person falls in love when he/she “meets his/her match.” Here, “match” doesn’t mean “fit” but “challenge.” Does this explain why Heathcliff disrespects Isabella and why Catherine disrespects Edgar? Does this explain disrespect we see in real relationships? Does this validate playing hard-to-get as such books as *The Rules* preach, or is it a call to a healthy self- esteem that attracts healthy people?

Most importantly, how do all these questions raised in *Wuthering Heights* translate to our living deliberately in terms of passion? If you are unmarried and have never found a soul mate, will you invest your time and/or money in a dating service or leave finding the One totally up to chance? Can compatibility tests or “science” used by dating services produce the man/woman of your dreams? Dr. Neil Clark Warren, founder of eHarmony, says there are “29 dimensions” in finding the One, and none of them are based on physical attraction/chemistry. Do you buy it…literally?

And how does passion affect the already-married? Some marriage counselors blame Hollywood for conjuring romantic love stories on the Big Screen that have caused us to demand passion in our own relationships. They say when reality doesn’t produce romance, we sadly, if not bitterly, many settle for a “dead” marriage or leave to find a better one. Again, is passion paramount? Is lack of passion the culprit of divorce or is giving passion first place the problem?

Reading or rereading the novel as an adult, we are challenged to consider our own love affairs. The passion of Heathcliff and Catherine may now be the expectation, but its rawness chaffs us. Maybe modern readers aren’t troubled by the ideal of soul mates who love hotly, but we are haunted by the fear we may not experience such love.

Heathcliff and Catherine may not shock us with their intensity, but they disturbed their initial readers. Emily Bronte, a quiet young woman who died never having a husband or lover of her own, was a rebel at heart who shook her first readers. Marriages in 19th century England were business transactions between respectable families to produce heirs. Passion, if a factor at all, wasn’t discussed in polite company and certainly wasn’t a deal breaker. Thanks to Bronte, it now often is. But is a demand for passion a good thing?