

WUTHERING HEIGHTS - The Choice of Narrator

Elisa Cristina de Proença Rodrigues Gallo - UFMG

One of the most important controversies which critics have waged around *Wuthering Heights* concerns the nature of its plot, its construction, and more particularly the mode of narration.

The way the reader gets to know the story – a tale told by an old servant to a tenant – may seem dull and uninteresting, and even somewhat childish, if thought of in terms of "once-upon-a-time" fairy tales.

Such tales are so pregnant with marks of a past that the interest of the listener is at once thwarted by the implicit fatalism or by the notorious lesson on morals at the end.

Fortunately, this partial loss of interest due to total destruction of suspense is not repeated in the reading/listening situations that are the basis for the structuring of the plot, that is, in the relationship between Nelly Dean and Mr. Lockwood – narrator and listener/narrator in *Wuthering Heights*

First of all, Emily Brontë is not at all worried about imposing or defending a moral code. Each character acts and reacts according to his own ideas and beliefs, allowing his feelings to speak louder than reason.

The author is not concerned whether society is to condone their behavior. She lets them loose to act of their own free will.

In addition to that, Emily handles time with care. As Nelly Dean tells her story, past and present are so intermingled that it is difficult for the reader to establish a distinction between them: the course of events seems to be taking place at the very

moment Nelly is talking about them.

The skillful use of flashbacks, of detailed descriptions and of lively dialogues prevent the reader from thinking that something is being "retold" to him, though sometimes the author reminds him of this fact. This can be seen in the following remark by Lockwood:

"At this point of the housekeeper's story, she chanced to glance towards the time-piece over the chimney; and was in amazement, on seeing the minute-hand measure half past one. She would not hear of staying a second longer – in truth, I felt rather disposed to defer the sequel of her narrative, myself: and now, that she is vanished to her rest, and I have meditated for another hour or two, I shall summon courage to go, also, in spite of aching laziness of head and limbs."¹

The example above is good illustration for Lockwood's double role in the narrative structure of the novel: narrator and listener.

The first chapter of the book is told in the first person by Mr. Lockwood, the tenant of Thushcross Grange, who calls on his neighbour and landlord, Mr. Heathcliff of Wuthering Heights.

As narrator, Lockwood deals with the present. His narration, though, is a little affected and facetious, sometimes showing his cynicism on the situation:

"He Heathcliff – probably swayed by prudential considerations of the folly of offending a good tenant – relaxed, a little, in the laconic style of chipping off his pronouns, and auxiliary verbs; and introduced what he supposed would be a subject of interest to me, a discourse on the advantages and disadvantages of my present place of retirement." (Ch. 1, pp. 49-50).

As listener, Lockwood fulfills the function of introducing

the reader into the narration. Both are outsiders eager to know from Mrs. Dean the saga of the Earnshaws and the Lintons.

Lockwood does not seem to be the ideal narrator: he is subjective enough to show only his particular view of reality, where his personal feelings are of great importance.

Nelly Dean, on the other hand, seems to be Brontë's perfect choice of narrator. A talkative, uncultured woman she represents the balance between reason and feeling.

As the characters' confidante she remains discrete though she does not refuse to express her own ideas or to give people some advice whenever they ask her to do so.

Conscious of her position of a household servant, she leaves to Lockwood the chance to strike up a conversation.

In fact, the new tenant of Thrushcross Grange was eager for more information about the peculiar people he found on his visit to the Heights, and in this way he starts:

*"You have lived here a considerable time,"
... "did you not say sixteen years?"*

"Eighteen, sir; I came, when the mistress was married, to wait on her; after she died, the master retained me for his housekeeper."

"Indeed."

There ensued a pause. She was not a gossip, I feared, unless about her own affairs, and those could hardly interest me.

However, having studied for an interval, with a fist on either knee, and a cloud of meditation over her ruddy countenance, she ejaculated.

"Ah, times are greatly changed since then!"

"Yes," I remarked, "you've seen a good many

alterations, I suppose?"

"I have: and troubles too," she said.

(Ch. 4, p. 74).

Though uncultured and superstitious, Nelly Dean is broad-minded and objective.

The fact that she is an attentive and careful spectator of all events but by no means a protagonist of any confers on her the qualities of a good narrator: precision, clarity and objectivity.

Nelly is able to make a cold analysis of everything and to give Mr. Lockwood a sharply clear and detailed account of the sagas of the two families.

The following is one of the best instances of Nelly's role as narrator. Catherine is telling her the reasons of her choice for marrying Edgar Linton and, at the same time, asking for her approval. Nelly does not interfere in her decision; but she makes Cathy think over the facts and decide by herself whether she was wrong or not.

"Are you alone, Nelly?"

"Yes, Miss," I replied. ...

"Oh, dear!" She cried at last. "I'm very unhappy!"

"A pity," observed I, "You're hard to please—so many friends and so few cares, and can't make yourself content!"

"Nelly, will you keep a secret for me?..."

"It is worth keeping?" I inquired, less sulkily.

"Yes, and it worries me, and I must let it out! 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."

"Really, Miss Catherine, how can I know?" I replied. "To be sure, considering the exhibition you performed in his presence, this afternoon, I might say it would be wise to refuse him — since he asked you after that, he must either be hopelessly stupid, or a venturesome fool."

"If you talk so, I won't tell you any more," she returned peevishly rising to her feet. "I accepted him, Nelly. Be quick and say whether I was wrong!"

"You accepted him? then, what good is it discussing the matter? You have pledged your word, and cannot retract."

"But, say whether I should have done so — do!"

"There are many things to be considered, before that question can be answered properly," I said sententiously. "First and foremost, do you love Mr. Edgar?"

"Who can help it? Of course I do," she answered."

(Ch. 9, pp. 117-8).

The dialogue goes on in this way, with Nelly compelling Cathy to answer why and how she loves Edgar.

When she comes to the conclusion that she loves him because he is handsome, young, cheerful, and rich, and loves her, Nelly is reasonable enough to raise three objections:

The first one is that the fact of his loving her goes for nothing; Cathy would probably love him without that and, very likely, with it and without the other attractions she wouldn't.

Cathy agrees.

Nelly then makes her realize that there are other handsomer and possibly richer young men in the world; to which Catherine replies that if there be any they are out her way.

Nelly makes the last attempt:

"He won't always be handsome, and young, and may not always be rich."

"He is now: and I have only to do with the present — I wish you would speak rationally."

"Well, that settles it — if you have only to do with the present, marry Mr. Linton."

"I don't want your permission for that — I SHALL marry him; and yet, you have not told me whether I'm right."

"Perfectly right! if people be right to marry only for the present."

(Ch. 9, p. 119).

Nelly's function as narrator is the same as a Greek Chorus.

As the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* puts it, "the chorus attends the action as a dependent society in miniature, giving the public resonance of individual action. Thus the chorus exults, fears, wonders, mourns, and attempts, out of its store of moralities to cope with an action whose meaning is both difficult and unfamiliar.

By doing so the chorus generalizes the meaning of an action and at the same time revives and refreshes the choral wisdom. But almost never is the chorus' judgement of events authoritative; if it is an intruded voice, it is normally the voice of tradition,

not the dramatist."²

Like a chorus, Nelly Dean stands on one of the sides of the stage. Though not a protagonist, she lives in the same time and at the same place in which the tragedy takes place. And she comments objectively on the action, to make the audience – Lockwood and readers – understand it better.

Although the method of narration used in *Wuthering Heights* has been often criticized, we still think that the choice of Nelly Dean as narrator has provided Emily Brontë with one more important structural device used to create a sense of balance.

There could surely be no better point of view than the Earnshaws' old servant's: Nelly Dean possesses all the qualities required of a good narrator: a broad-minded, well-balanced woman, she is a careful and attentive observer and an objective and meticulous reporter.

NOTES

¹ Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1969), Ch. 9, p. 129.

All subsequent quotations from this novel are taken from this edition.

² Preminger, Warnke + Hardison, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 125.