

## **“I only speak from hearsay”: Layered Narration and the Extension of the Brontë Myth in *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey***

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### **Abstract**

Criticism regarding the works of the Brontë sisters has historically been complicated by the inextricable weaving of the authors' biographical information with over a century of compelling myth. Indeed, Elizabeth Gaskell's intimate biography, which romanticizes select struggles of the Brontës and confines the sisters to crippling isolation at their father's parsonage in Haworth, is perhaps more aptly termed a culprit of spinning fantasy than an objective history for the family. For Emily and Anne, the aura of ambiguity which shrouds their family's history is made more difficult still by the style of narration that characterizes their major prose works, a complex interlacing of pseudonyms, primary narrators, and numerous sub-narrators within individual novels. This paper will argue that the technique of layered narration in both Emily's *Wuthering Heights* and Anne's *Agnes Grey* is not only a device conceived to facilitate the progression of the narrative and the development of characters but also a protective extension of the Brontë myth, a means of diluting the social responsibility of revolutionary perspectives on romance, religion and proto-feminist values in their work. This paper will consider the limitations on publishing opportunities for women writing in the early to mid-nineteenth century, particularly as motivation for the outermost layer of narration in each novel—the masculine pseudonyms of the writers. It will argue that the use of layered narration in both novels creates the illusion of credible—and usually masculine—narrators privy to the unseemly events and ideas expressed in the narratives yet aware of the social constraints of their audiences. It will also discuss layered narration as a means of creating a forum of conflicting perspectives in which to deliberate moral issues, even those issues which argue radically against the foundations of Victorian culture and ideals of femininity. In unraveling the intricate narrative style of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, this argument interrogates the perception of Emily and Anne Brontë as the quiet, isolated, and hyper-feminine daughters woven into the fabric of the Brontë myth, instead recognizing the young authors as bearing far greater resemblance to their impassioned and radical heroines. It suggests that yet another, separate narrative emerges from the seams of the sub-narrations of their major novels, the narrative of two Brontë authors and revolutionary proto-feminists keenly aware of their precarious position in the male-dominated literary world as well as the elusive narrative tactics required to voice their opinions.

**Keywords: Brontë, Myth, Narration**

### **1. Introduction**

In June of 1834, Charlotte Brontë writes to close friend Ellen Nussey, “[T]he minds of the rest of man and woman kind are to me sealed volumes...which I cannot easily either unseal or decipher. Yet time [and] careful study...overcome most difficulties.”<sup>8</sup> Written well before the instant success of her seminal work *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte's letter situates herself as an “obscure” spectator of the interworkings of Victorian people, society and ideology. This confession would set the tone for her detailed exploration of characters in her later novels and would add to over a century of compelling myth surrounding her family's isolation. For Emily and Anne Brontë, the aura of

ambiguity which shrouds their family's history is made more difficult still by the style of narration that characterizes their major prose works, a complex interlacing of pseudonyms, primary narrators, and numerous sub-narrators. This paper will argue that the technique of layered narration in both Emily's *Wuthering Heights* and Anne's *Agnes Grey* is not only a device used to broaden the insight of the narrative and negotiate credibility between a female primary narrator and a male-dominated literary circle, but also a protective extension of the Brontë myth, a means of diluting the social responsibility of revolutionary perspectives on romance, religion, and feminist values in their work. In unraveling the intricate narrative style of these novels, this essay interrogates the perception of the Brontë sisters, particularly Emily and Anne, as the quiet, isolated, and hyper-feminine daughters woven into the fabric of the Brontë myth. Instead, it will offer an understanding of the Brontë sisters as authors and revolutionary proto-feminists keenly aware of their position in a patriarchal culture and the elusive narrative tactics required to voice their opinions.

## 2. Historical Context

In their groundbreaking 1979 work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar illuminate both the external struggle for publication as well as the internal "anxiety of authorship" experienced by women writers in the nineteenth-century.<sup>9</sup> Predicated on centuries of masculine discourse and the increasingly rigid stratification of gender roles, the literary sphere of the Victorian era remained a largely uncharted and hostile environment for women. Indeed, as Gilbert and Gubar note, the intellectual woman in search of publication risked being regarded by her contemporaries as "anomalous, indefinable, alienated, a freakish outsider."<sup>9</sup> This was due, as Lucasta Miller argues, less with the female author's transgression into the public sphere than with the implication that women harbored creative tendencies and desires incongruent with the ever-moral "angel in the house" archetype.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, critics reviewing *Wuthering Heights* after the release of Emily's identity reproached the novel's "raging emotions and amorality" in large part due to their discomfort with "the idea of a woman writing a love story from the female point of view in which the heroine uninhibitedly expressed her passion."<sup>12</sup> Thus, it is perhaps of little surprise that female authors writing in the face of significant retaliation endeavored to circumvent struggles in the publishing sphere by distancing themselves from the sex associated with social and literary inferiority. While strategies to appear less feminine arose in a variety of degrees, Gilbert and Gubar assert that "the most rebellious...writers protested not that they were 'as good as' men but that, as writers, they *were* men."<sup>9</sup> In their adoption of masculine pseudonyms and in their relentless efforts to publish and publicize their work alongside men, the Brontës situate themselves well into this faction of determined and subversive nineteenth-century female authors.

The external illusion of masculinity, however, was neither fully sufficient to ward off discrimination from contemporary authors and publishers nor to alleviate the anguish felt by women writing groundbreaking feminist discourse without historic female authors from which to make reference. Gilbert and Gubar term the latter experience the "anxiety of authorship," which constitutes the "dread of the patriarchal authority of art, her anxiety about the impropriety of female invention—all these phenomena of 'inferiorization' [that] mark the woman writer's struggle for artistic self-definition."<sup>9</sup> In writing as a woman and in writing into existence heroines who diverged from traditional female archetypes, the Brontës and other nineteenth-century women authors were charged with negotiating the "Palaces of Art and Houses of Fiction" constructed and occupied by men for centuries.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, this issue was compounded with the concern of provoking large-scale retaliation from reviewers and the public alike. The perilous intersection of these impediments resulted in the creation of the paradox that would later characterize the narrative style of the Brontë novels: a female author intent on success must write as both a woman and as a man. As Gilbert and Gubar note, nineteenth-century women authors approached this contradiction through a variety of strategies, uniting in a common effort to "creat[e] submerged meanings, meanings hidden within or behind the more accessible, 'public' content of their works, so that their literature could be read and appreciated even when its vital concern with female dispossession and disease was ignored."<sup>9</sup> For the Brontës, these efforts manifested in an endlessly complex style of narration that consists of multiple masculine and feminine narrators whose tales interrupt, interpret, and obscure one another, resulting in a teasing narrative that espouses radical proto-feminist ideals even while rendering them appropriate for a male-dominated literary audience.

## 3. Literature Review

The unique narrative style of the Brontë sisters and their relationship to the unaccommodating Victorian social terrain have not escaped critical notice. Indeed, Andrew Abraham argues that Emily's use of strategic narration in *Wuthering*

*Heights* reflects a calculated challenge of and adherence to patriarchal law.<sup>1</sup> Emily, he asserts, creates a semblance of balance for her essentially female- and lower-class-centered narrative by juxtaposing scandalous scenes with reminders of Catherine's financial dependence and moralizing commentary from the "protectress of patriarchy," Nelly Dean.<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, Judith Stuchiner argues that the primary exchange of narration between Nelly Dean and Lockwood indicates Emily's attempt to illuminate the novel's class divide.<sup>16</sup> She states: "By enclosing Nelly's inner narration, the seed of *Wuthering Heights*, within Lockwood's outer narration, Brontë achieves the effect that Lockwood's bourgeois perspective is permeated by Nelly's working-class perspective.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Sara Saei Dibavar and Shideh Ahmadzadeh argue that the novel's intricate structure simultaneously reflects Emily's confinement and pursuit of experience.<sup>13</sup> They suggest that Emily is "multiplied through the voices and the person of her/his characters," particularly Catherine.<sup>13</sup> However, Emily's zealous exploration is rendered appropriate for audiences by the mediating voices of Nelly and Lockwood: "Nelly can use language properly to narrate a passionate story by neutralizing it. This neutralizing process happens in part through the distance she and later Lockwood create by removing the story of its immediacy."<sup>13</sup>

In contrast, little criticism has been dedicated to Anne's use of complex narration in *Agnes Grey*. However, scholars continue to return to the carefully constructed political undertones of Anne's work. Katherine Hallemeier explores the paradox of shame in *Agnes Grey*, suggesting that Agnes shifts seamlessly between projecting shame onto her employers, assuming shame for herself as "both a governess and a woman who writes," and redefining shame as "a means of self-assertion and something to be enjoyed."<sup>10</sup> Thus, Agnes's critiques of Victorian bourgeois culture as well as her rise to self-empowerment are obscured by the ambiguous nature of shame. Similarly, Maggie Berg analyzes Anne's careful commentary on the status of women in the narrative's repeated diversions into scenes involving animals.<sup>3</sup> She argues that Anne radically "evokes the links between the nineteenth-century anti-vivisection and women's rights movements" and places the humanity of women into question by associating her heroines with fragile, ill-treated creatures.<sup>3</sup> Here again, Anne deliberately obscures political commentary by creating an additional sub-narrative that regularly intersects with the major plot line of the novel. Critics writing about *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* have done important work identifying the Brontës' use of complex narration as a way to comment on law, class, and the status of women. However, the singular focus of these arguments has prevented critics from situating the micro-scale implications of layered narration into the larger context of the Brontë myth. I will argue that layered narration plays a practical role in allowing for the success of the complex narratives and political undertones of both novels. More critically, however, I will argue that layered narration serves an important role in producing pseudo-masculine, and therefore credible, manuscripts for a discriminating nineteenth-century audience.

#### 4. *Wuthering Heights*

From a practical perspective, both Emily and Anne's chain of narrators function as a device to overcome the limitations of a single narrator, especially those constraints imposed by gender and status. In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë crafts primary narrator Nelly Dean, ideal not only for her "cultivate[d]... reflective faculties"—as Lockwood notes—but also for her position within the Linton and Earnshaw households.<sup>6</sup> As Catherine's maid—and later as her daughter's maid—Nelly Dean acts as the only "soul... that [Catherine] might fashion into an adviser," as "[young Catherine's] friend and counselor to the last," and as a constant companion to both in her duties as a servant and as a surrogate mother-figure.<sup>6</sup> Significantly, she also commands the respect of Heathcliff, the cryptic character whom she helps to raise during his years at *Wuthering Heights*. The decision to characterize Nelly as a long-standing, central component of the household not only familiarizes her with the history of both families but also necessitates her presence in all scenes involving her charge and affords her the opportunity to gain invaluable insight to the intimate exchanges and violent outbursts that characterize both romances. Nelly's true value as a narrator, however, lies in her ability to stand outside of the events that consume both families as a "cool spectator" who sympathizes with her charges yet understands her responsibilities as hired help. She notes, "many a time I've cried to myself to watch them growing more reckless daily, and I not daring to speak a syllable for fear of losing the small power I still retained over the unfriended creatures."<sup>6</sup> In this statement, however, Nelly's voicelessness also alludes to the boundaries of her control over her charges and over the narrative, indicating the gender constraint all too familiar to the Brontë sisters as one-time governesses themselves. Perceiving the strategic advantage of an additional narrative and a masculine mediating voice, Emily Brontë passes the chain of narration to Mr. Lockwood.

As a stranger to Thrushcross Grange and, indeed, even a stranger to the popular social circles of his time, Lockwood acts as the uninformed narrator whose presence is essential in prompting the retelling of Nelly's tale. Paralleling the pursuit of the reader, it is also his insatiable curiosity concerning "the unknown Catherine" that encourages the progression of the narrative.<sup>6</sup> Although lacking significant development in his character, Lockwood's gender alone

acts as a measure to legitimize an essentially female-centered narrative to the public. Lockwood lends credibility to the primary female narrator whose story he accepts and relays to the audience in her own words. Strategically, it is his narrative which the reader encounters first, and again his narrative that closes the novel, cutting off feminine narrator Nelly Dean. He writes, “I felt irresistibly impelled to escape them again, and...disregarding [Mrs. Dean’s] expostulations at my rudeness, I vanished.”<sup>6</sup> As the final voice in the narrative, he is charged with negotiating closure as he gradually distances the audience from the narrative by physically distancing himself from *Wuthering Heights*, and in the novel’s final line, it is Lockwood’s masculine credibility that passes final judgment on Catherine, Heathcliff, and Edgar Linton, identifying them not as individuals whose transgressions against dominant ideology have earned them death but as peaceful “sleepers in that quiet earth.”<sup>6</sup>

## 5. *Agnes Grey*

In *Agnes Grey*, Anne Brontë’s use of layered narration, though not deployed to the same extent seen in Emily’s novel, also functions on a practical level to circumvent the limitations of a single narrator and to lend credibility to the female narrator and narrative. Like Nelly Dean, Agnes’s station and intimate connection with the families for whom she works provides the novel with a delicate balance of objective commentary and emotional investment. As a governess, Agnes bears witness to the private details of the Murray family life including confrontations between Matilda Murray and her mother, shortfalls in the boys’ education, Rosalie Murray’s secrets and coquetry, and other conversations between her charges that aid in establishing the character of the Murrays outside of the public eye. However, Agnes’s own assertions reveal that even she cannot fully assimilate into the family’s private sphere. In her experiences with the youth of the landed gentry, she recalls that “if their eyes, in speaking, chanced to fall on [her], it seemed as if they looked on vacancy” and later describes herself as “one deaf and dumb, who could neither speak nor be spoken to.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, Agnes, like Nelly Dean, stands outside of the affairs of her employers, a spectator neither fully consumed with an emotional connection to the family nor entirely separate. Again, the female narrator’s reluctance to overstep the constraints of her social position limits the content she is able to access and discuss without the support of other narrations. In Agnes’s case, the novel’s shift from a focus on her occupation as a governess to her romance with Mr. Weston threatens to endanger her credibility as a “cool spectator.”

Anne Brontë’s use of sub-narrations, which appear in large part toward the end of the novel, stems from the stories of the cottagers who first bring Agnes to acknowledge the parson as a suitable partner. Villager Nancy Brown first introduces the prospect of their relationship following her narration of Mr. Weston’s charity visits, chronicling his piety and goodwill. When Nancy asks Agnes how she regards the parson, however, Agnes is “startled by the suddenness of the question.”<sup>4</sup> Because Agnes’s attraction to Mr. Weston derives not from his appearance or charm but rather from various accounts of his good deeds, Agnes’s credibility as the morally rigid and still somewhat objective narrator is reinforced. Perhaps more critically though, the distance between her love interest and the frivolous coquetry that characterizes Rosalie’s relationships is made apparent. Anne’s decision to use layered narration allows Agnes to break away from the confining archetype of the hyper-sensitive or promiscuous female character, moving instead toward her development as an insightful, socially conscious heroine whose motives—even in romance—are carefully evaluated.

## 6. Masculine Pseudonyms

Zooming out further still from the ideal primary narrators and the sub-narrations that strengthen their credibility, a final, outermost layer of narration—the masculine pseudonym—indicates a similar pursuit of credibility by the authors themselves. Emily and Anne Brontë’s creation of the alternative identities Ellis and Acton Bell indicate, on a superficial level, not only a desire for anonymity as private individuals but also a desire to ensure that their texts were evaluated fairly in terms of their merit rather than in terms of their author. In the brief biographical notice that supplements the later publications of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, Charlotte Brontë states of the sisters’ use of pennames: “[W]e did not like to declare ourselves women, because...we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice.”<sup>5</sup> However, the use of layered narration to the extent of masculine pseudonyms appears also as a technique to distance the Brontë sisters from public or critical retaliation against the controversial feminist undertones of their work. In a letter to her later biographer Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë explains an additional thread of logic behind the selection of pseudonyms, claiming that her “chief reason for maintaining an

incognito is the fear that if she relinquished it, strength and courage would leave her, and she should ever after shrink from writing the plain truth.”<sup>8</sup>

By aligning masculine authors with controversial and emotional narratives, the Brontë sisters took steps to create a less restrictive outlet for their unorthodox views on romance, religion and female independence. In *Agnes Grey*, Anne Brontë, with the aid of her pseudonym and primary narrator, pointedly notes her attempts to obscure her identity. Agnes balances her bold desires to “act for [her]self...to earn [her] own maintenance” and to prove that she is “not quite the helpless, thoughtless being they supposed” only after stating that her account is “shielded by...obscurity, and by the lapse of years, and a few fictitious names.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, her freedom to openly criticize the “accomplished” Victorian woman, the ethics of marrying for economic and social elevation, and the treatment of governesses is provided by her confidence in the fact that “they that read it will not know the writer.”<sup>4</sup> In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë’s extensive use of layered narration provides a similar, though less vocal, distance from her work. An 1848 review of the novel in the *Examiner* notes that the moral incongruities of the multiple narrators who relay the story leaves readers unable to “ascribe any particular attention to the author” although the work itself was widely condemned for its excessive violence, vengeance and anti-religious nature.<sup>2</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

In *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, Emily and Anne Brontë experiment with the technique of layered narration as much for its functional uses as for its ability to perpetuate the protective Brontë myth. Indeed, it is the same “myth” criticized for complicating biographical efforts on the sisters that also afforded their works and the feminist undertones of their heroines the opportunity to thrive in patriarchal Victorian society. Unknown to the Brontë sisters during their lifetime, the fabric of the myth that began in their captivating stories would continue to grow more expansive and intricate after their death. Unwilling to “modestly confess [their] female ‘limitations’” as was customary of women writers at the time, the Brontës left much of the parsing and apologizing to their biographers.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Harriet Martineau initially complicated the identities of the sisters by offering tales of extreme isolation as an explanation for their inability to conform to cultural norms.<sup>12</sup> In a similar attempt to preserve the dignity of the Brontë name, author Elizabeth Gaskell composed an imaginative biography of Charlotte and her family, depicting the sisters as “feminine, domestic” and “irreproachably sexless,” their scandalous works stemming from a life of tragedy and poor male influence.<sup>12</sup> Later still, the myth grew to include William Dearden’s controversial attribution of *Wuthering Heights* to Branwell, the troubled Brontë brother.<sup>12</sup>

Decades of meticulous investigation of the remaining manuscripts, letters, and biographical sources surrounding the Brontë sisters have allowed scholars to unravel important sections of the Brontë myth in order to move closer to the truth of their elusive family history. Even despite the authors’ efforts to create an intricately woven narrative structure of pseudonyms, primary narrators, and sub-narrators, Charlotte’s biographical statement regarding the identity of her sisters indicates that both Emily and Anne left distinct marks of themselves within their novels. Critic Edward Chitham notes that Emily’s influence is inextricably linked to her primary narrator: “Nelly is Ellen and is obviously related to Ellis (Emily’s pseudonym), and her Christian name. Like many of the parts conned by this actress, Nelly is a part of Emily, the well-read housekeeper at Haworth parsonage.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Anne’s devout nature, moral uprightness, and personal struggles as a governess prior to the composition of her work draw strong parallels between herself and the primary narrator of *Agnes Grey*. However, even considering the breakthrough of these small details, critics remain less than optimistic about uncovering a comprehensive, objective understanding of the family. As Lucasta Miller states: “In the half century which followed Gaskell’s *Life*, the Brontë story had been retold so many times and in so many forms that through sheer force of repetition it had shifted from the level of history to that of myth.”<sup>12</sup> Although their works hold a distinct place in the literary canon and are consulted even today for their feminist underpinnings, the distinction between Emily, Ellis and Ellen Dean, Anne, Acton and Agnes is not as easily defined, the layered narration of their works producing a legacy that hovers somewhere between reality and fiction.

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