Teaching *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* in a 
Survey of the Nineteenth-Century English Novel

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In teaching the nineteenth-century English novel, I have several goals. I want to engage my students in reading and enjoying a wonderful group of novels—novels that are “good reads.” In addition, the course can help students to understand the genre by studying its development during a period of great growth. And finally, because novelists usually create a rich social context for the characters and events they describe, a look at the novels of any given period provides a window into the culture that produced them. To follow a prominent thread in the genre, we examine the novels as examples of the bildungsroman or novel of education.

Growing up or becoming educated for adulthood in society requires for most of us and for many of the heroes and heroines we find interesting in our reading a kind of give and take, a negotiation in which we must adapt somewhat to society’s expectations while still holding on to our own best values. I ask my students to consider two questions at the start of the course: What does society expect of them as they enter adulthood? What do they need to achieve happiness and retain personal integrity? In their discussion of these factors, students agree that societal expectations and personal needs may not always be compatible.

We move from our own twenty-first-century responses to the question of self and society to a discussion of the confrontation between self and society as depicted in the nineteenth-century novel. Beginning with Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, we see the strengths and shortcomings of the society in which her heroine lives, in regard to class distinctions, the education of young people, the social customs and manners of the gentry, and the importance placed on marriage as the proper situation for women. Because Elizabeth Bennet is given little guidance or faulty guidance, she must educate herself, relying on her own reason and correcting her judgments as she goes. In the process, she reviews not only her own behavior but the cultural norms she has been handed, accepting most but critiquing, along with the narrator, those that would negate her deeply held values.

Charlotte and Emily Brontë take up the discussion of education for maturity they inherit from Austen and add to it, exploring new territory.
in the self and using new methods to conduct that exploration. Of course, not everything they say is new. Charlotte, for example, has views similar to Austen’s on the inadvisability of marrying where there is no affection and on the plight of women who are forced to support themselves as governesses in the homes of those beneath them in understanding. But both Charlotte and Emily Brontë include more overt and covert passion in their novels, although each employs her own method.

Our class discussions of *Jane Eyre* focus on Charlotte Brontë’s efforts to add to the bildungsroman the element she felt it lacked: “What throbs fast and fully, though hidden, what the blood rushed through, what is the unseen seat of Life” (qtd. in Gordon 1994: 178). We discuss the first-person narration Brontë employs, trying to determine how the narrator’s method of recording her younger self in the act of feeling and thinking about what she experiences adds to readers’ understanding of her growth. Students examine Brontë’s use of a kind of internal debate, called “allegorical fragmentation” by Barbara Hardy (1985: 104), a method that helps Brontë show passion and social norms in conflict within the individual. During one passage of the novel, for example, the narrator traces Jane’s struggle to overcome her growing attraction to Mr. Rochester, whom she suspects will marry Blanche Ingram. Brontë stages an argument between two divisions of Jane, one that has seen signs of love in Mr. Rochester’s eyes when he looks at her and one that understands that his upbringing has prepared him to marry someone of more social consequence and beauty than Jane possesses. Memory gives “evidence of the hopes, wishes, sentiments I had been cherishing since last night,” and Reason tells “a plain, unvarnished tale, showing how I had rejected the real, and raptly devours the ideal” (183). Her plain, unvarnished tale, a societal message that could have come directly from a conduct book, is the kind of instruction for life that Jane feels she needs. However, while the evidence of memory is discounted as unconvincing at this point, it will soon be given a better hearing: “Did I say, a few days since, that I had nothing to do with him but to receive my salary at his hands? . . . Blasphemy against nature! Every good, true, vigorous feeling I have, gathers impulsively round him” (199).

While this allegorical fragmentation shows a conscious struggle within Jane as she attempts to confine her hopes, Brontë also hints at a deeper struggle with a self Jane cannot really recognize. Brontë uses various Gothic conventions to express this hidden struggle. For example, besides worrying about whether Mr. Rochester will return her love, the narrating Jane also connects the acting Jane and the mad Bertha Rochester in a way that suggests an affinity between them. Gilbert and Gubar have famously traced this con-

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nection in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). I ask students to examine the portions of the novel in which Bertha is mentioned either by name or as Grace Poole to see what is happening to Jane at the time, what events call forth the madwoman in Jane, a beast she would like to lock away. Other signs pointing to Jane’s unconscious fears and desires are also explored: her memory of the violent splitting of the oak tree on the night of her engagement, her dreams of a burdensome child, her vision of Mother Nature, and her hearing of a voice from the heavens calling her back to Mr. Rochester. Examining these incidents, students begin to see that Brontë uses them to suggest a different kind of education for Jane. The heroine Jane does not consciously link her own desires with Bertha’s brutish appetite, but the sound of Bertha’s laugh and her jealous ripping of Jane’s wedding veil are warnings to the young governess not to let her desire override her principles. They also emphasize that Jane has passion. When Jane and Rochester do wed, their union must incorporate that passion in a lawful marriage. Brontë’s use of the Gothic has allowed her to enlarge the bildungsroman’s heroine and to hint at aspects of her nature and experience that even the Jane who narrates does not name.

Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* also grafts passion onto the bildungsroman. Brontë’s narrators, Lockwood and Nelly Dean, seem to place a socially acceptable, normative frame around the often violent events they relate and around the novel as a whole. Nelly particularly adopts the role of instructor, the older and wiser person who could have led Catherine and Heathcliff to socially acceptable maturity had they only listened. As her sister did in the opening pages of *Jane Eyre*, Emily Brontë wastes little time before introducing discord and the strong passions producing it in *Wuthering Heights*. However, in the first chapters of the novel, Brontë destroys any notion we might be forming of Lockwood as more reasonable and sane than the characters he meets at Wuthering Heights. For Lockwood, although visiting the Heights in the guise of a disinterested outsider and gentleman, performs the most heinous piece of violence in the novel, physically harming a child, even if the incident does occur in a dream. The passage must be looked at as part of the overall plan, so I encourage students to consider what it suggests about Lockwood and the society he represents.

Students are also asked to examine Nelly’s role in the novel, as principal narrator and as participant in the action. We examine how she comments on the action, giving her own view of Heathcliff’s early life but also implying his culpability in the division of the family, as she does in comparing Heathcliff to a cuckoo. She moralizes over Heathcliff’s failure to forgive Hindley and feels the first Catherine should have been satisfied by her marriage to

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Edgar Linton. She also acts in the novel or sometimes significantly fails to act, as for example, when she conceals from Edgar his wife’s refusal to eat until she is dangerously ill. Lockwood praises Nelly as the voice of reason, but as John K. Mathison points out in a classic reexamination of her role, Nelly reveals “the futility of a tolerant common-sense attitude which is the result of a desire merely to avoid trouble, to deny serious problems, and to grasp genuinely the emotions of others” (qtd. in Peterson 1992: 298). I ask students to consider Nelly’s version of the characters and their stories. How reliable is Nelly?

The use of two generations of young people in *Wuthering Heights* is our final subject for discussion. The second generation seems to combine passion and culture in the happy union of Catherine Linton and Hareton Earnshaw. Clearly that is Nelly’s view and Lockwood’s, but then what are we to make of Heathcliff and Catherine? Are we to suppose that Catherine’s claim that she is one with Heathcliff indicates a deep psychological problem, as some critics have suggested? Or do Catherine and Heathcliff possess a depth of passion incomprehensible to Nelly and Lockwood, and is Catherine’s mistake her effort to put it aside for a union with the more socially acceptable Edgar Linton? I ask students to consider whether Catherine and Heathcliff represent a kind of passion that cannot be successfully integrated into society in a happy ending for their novel of education. The ending Brontë wrote for her second generation of lovers suggests to some readers that spirit and passion can survive in society, even if in a slightly muted form, provided one gets educated early enough in life. But other readers feel that Emily Brontë calls into question that assumption; they point to the continuing interest of readers and moviegoers in the tragic story of the passionate Catherine and Heathcliff.

Other novels in the course provide additional variations on the Bildungsroman. For example, Dickens’s *Great Expectations* examines a delayed but ultimately successful education for society, George Eliot’s *Silas Marner* shows an adult guided to maturity by the love of a child, and Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* pits a young heroine against overwhelming forces working against her. Because of the light they focus on both the individual initiate and on the society he or she is trying to enter, novels of education provide an excellent overview of the century’s literature. *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* are especially important to the course; the Brontës add dimensions to the bildungsroman’s characters, particularly the heroines, and invent the techniques by which novelists can explore them.
Works Cited

Teaching *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* in a Variety of Courses

Mary Bradley McElligott

“. . . in a short time she has made much improvement.”

“Sir, you have now given me my ‘cadeau’; I am obliged to you; it is the need teachers most covet; praise of their pupils’ progress.”

“Humph!” said Mr. Rochester.

—Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*

I have taught for more years than I think wise to enumerate at Marymount College in Tarrytown, New York, a small, liberal arts college for women that has recently consolidated with Fordham University. Given this particular teaching experience, I would like to make a few points at the outset. First, my students have all been young women, which has, of course, influenced these students’ responses to *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. My students frequently do speculate about what “guys” would think of certain aspects of the novels (Jane’s hearing Rochester’s voice at the end of the narrative springs immediately to mind) and, indeed, how their own responses might differ had said “guys” been present for our discussions. Second, before the consolidation with Fordham in 2002, many of our English majors did not plan to attend graduate school immediately upon graduation. This, and the