Original Paper

Voice Beyond Discourse: Nelly's Narrative Intervention and Narrative Ethics in *Wuthering Heights*

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Abstract

Wuthering Heights, the masterpiece of British author Emily Brontë, depicts a story about "a storm of love and vengeance". It has secured an unshakable position in world literary history through its vivid imagination, delicate structure, and Gothic style. Current scholarly analyses of its multiple narrative perspectives predominantly focuses on the multiplicity of narrators' identities and the reliability of narrative discourse, yet insufficient attention has been paid to the core of narrative artistry—the function of narrators and their discursive interventions. Nelly Dean, as the primary narrator of the novel, not only propels the narrative progression but also takes on a mediating role in character dialogues through moral evaluations and emotional inclinations. This paper explores how the author employs Nelly's discursive interventions to interweave narrative progression, exercising the explanatory, judgmental, and summative functions. It tries to explain Brontë's skillful use of extratextual forms to grant Nelly a channel for voices, revealing her crucial role in foreshadowing and guiding the novel's emotional tone as well as controlling the rhythm and structure of the narrative. Furthermore, the study clarifies the relationship between the narrator's interventions and the narrative ethics of the implied author.

Keywords

narrator's discursive intervention, narrative ethics, Wuthering Heights, Emily Brontë

1. Introduction

Known as a 19th century British literary genius and celebrated poet, Emily Brontë authored *Wuthering Heights*, the sole novel published during her brief life. This work caused a sensation in 19th-century England literary stage. Centered on Heathcliff's "storm of love and vengeance" against the Earnshaw and Linton families, the novel brims with extraordinary passion against class and racial oppression, delivering a love tragedy that profoundly shocked its audience. It turns out to be, as Cecil remarked, "a

novel whose brilliance has not been dimmed (even partially) by the dust of time" (p. 328). Nevertheless, this novel initially held little appeal for the readers—marked by widespread neglect and misunderstanding in its first print, including Brontë's own sister Charlotte. She confessed in the preface to the novel that characters like Heathcliff, Earnshaw, and Catherine evoked "a horror of great darkness" in readers (pp. 315-316). Yet *Wuthering Heights* embraced its revival in the 20th century. Somerset Maugham ranked it among the world's ten greatest novels, praising its unparalleled depiction of "love's agony, obsession, cruelty, and persistence" (p. 233). Its resurgence in literary stature has sparked intense scholarly interest globally, earning it the title of the "Sphinx of modern English literature" (Shorter 1). The eminent British critic F. R. Leavis regarded Brontë as inaugurating a new tradition, calling *Wuthering Heights* "a startling work, like a game" (p. 27).

2. Literature Review

Scholarly consensus has been formed around the novel's narrative innovation: Brontë's ingenious use of dual narrators, one external and one internal, creates a "nested box" structure through shifting perspectives. The story is framed by Lockwood, an outsider who serves as the superficial external narrator. Within his account lies the tale narrated by Nelly Dean, the housekeeper of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, who functions as the internal, deeper narrator. Nelly's narrative, in turn, incorporates fragments from other characters—Isabella, Heathcliff, and so on—who act as tertiary embedded narrators. As Yuan observes, "The multiple narrators form a nested structure akin to boxes within boxes, structured hierarchically as 'Lockwood's narrative > Nelly's narrative > others' narratives'" (pp. 65-67). This dual narrative framework, with its layered perspectives, establishes a dynamic interplay between narrative subjects and experiential subjects (Liu, pp. 100-103), while revealing the hidden presence of female voices (Jiang, "The Hidden 'Other': An Analysis of Female Voices in *Wuthering Heights* Based on Narrative Perspective." pp. 43-46). Peng Ying further argues that under the veneer of the male narrator Lockwood, Nelly's female narrative voice ultimately supplants the text's patriarchal authority, reinterpreting women's lives and ideals through a feminine perspective (pp. 68-72). Additionally, within this dual structure, Brontë's manipulation of temporal-spatial arrangements and narrative discourse reliability—such as non-linear chronology, omissions and pauses in narrative time, and strategies like narrative frequency and embedded narration—imbues the novel with its distinctive artistry (Li, pp. 30-31; Quan, pp. 135-139; Qiao, pp. 116-118; Yang, pp. 158-161).

Nevertheless, scholarly debates persist regarding the reliability of the narrators. Nelly, both a storyteller and a participant in the events, becomes a "narrative mediator and reference point" through her commentary (Huang, pp. 104-108; Liang). Wang employs the concept of the "implied author" to argue for narrative reliability by aligning the narrator's attitudes with the implied author's values (pp. 119-124). However, other scholars contend that Lockwood's urban sensibilities, Nelly's social status

and limited cognition inevitably inject personal biases into the narrative, shaping unreliable narrators (Bensoussan; Mathison, pp. 106-129).

From the above we can see that the existing scholarship has extensively discussed the novel's multiple narrative perspectives, temporal-spatial arrangements, narrative reliability, and analyses of the narrator's role. But the research on foundational element of narrative artistry—narrator still remains confined to functional examinations of narrative unreliability. There could be further illustration on the consciousness-driven functions embedded within the narrator's discursive interventions and their implications for the relationship between the implied author and narrative ethics. To study the narrator's discursive interventions, it is first necessary to define non-narrative commentary, which refers to "statements of ideological concepts articulated through comments within the narrative text" (Bal & Tan, p. 28). It is based on the narrator's deviation from mere storytelling. As stated by Tan Junqiang, this intervention is often represented by the narrator's comments on characters, events, or even the text itself, "such interventions transcend the textual delineation of actors and environments, as well as the description of events". The naming of "commentary" derives form its piles of explicit value judgments and moral inclinations. (*Introduction to Narratology: From Classical Narratology to Postclassical Narratology*, pp. 73-83). According to Wayne C. Booth, narrative intervention typically manifests through six methods: (1) Providing factual "images" or summaries; (2) Shaping beliefs; (3) Relating specific elements to established norms; (4) Elevating the significance of events; (5) Controlling emotional tone; (6) Directly commenting on the work itself (*The Rhetoric of Fiction* 189-235). Seymour Chatman categorizes interventions into two types: intervention into the story and intervention into the discourse. He further elaborates on the former through three dimensions: Explanation: clarifying the story's meaning; Judgment: offering evaluative interpretations; and Generalization: asserting universal truths (p. 228). The author posits that the overarching trend of literary modernity in narrative is to "suppress or eliminate the authorial voice," with overt authorial intrusions becoming a taboo in modern storytelling (Lodge, pp. 9-10). Yet, an author cannot entirely divorce their creative process from subjective influences to achieve "objective" narration. In *Wuthering Heights*, Nelly's pervasive commentaries and lyrical interjections represent this tension. Her interventions either surface through emotionally charged epithets—Heathcliff is "rough as a saw-edge, and hard as whinstone" (E. Brontë, p. 31); Joseph is "the wearisomest, self-righteous pharisee" (37); Catherine is a "haughty, headstrong creature" (61); Hindley exhibits "wild-beast's fondness or his madman's rage" (p. 68)—or lurk within the narrative's structural fabric. For instance, Nelly's assertion, "I really thought him [Heathcliff] not vindictive—I was deceived completely, as you will hear" (36), and her metaphor, "an evil beast prowled between the lamb and the fold, waiting his time to spring out and destroy" (p. 101), explicitly reveal her ethical stance or subtly insinuate moral judgments. These interventions oppose Heathcliff's vengeful extremism, critique the hypocrisy of Joseph's religious dogmatism, and censure Catherine's unrestrained passions, thereby constructing the narrative's moral framework. Faced with such overtly evaluative and lyrical narration, we must critically interrogate: Did

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Emily Brontë consciously construct these moral judgments to indicate or satirize the social values recognized by her era? Or do the specific tones and emotions embedded in the narrative merely demonstrate the ethical orientation assigned to the narrator Nelly so as to guide the implied reader—the ideal reader imagined by the author—to fill these textual gaps, thereby prolonging the reader's aesthetic engagement? This paper focuses on the evaluative interventions in the narrative discourse of Nelly, the primary narrator, to explore the interplay between her narrative interventions and the implicit moral stance of the narrator—specifically, the relationship between Nelly's ethical judgments and the narrative ethics of the implied author. Through this perspective, the study further examines the implied author's modes of communicative engagement within the text.

3. Nelly's Narrative Intervention: Structural Manipulation

In intervening into discourse, a narrator may employ language or metanarrative techniques (manifested here as metadiegetic narration) to demarcate textual divisions, establish coherence, and clarify structural relationships, thereby revealing the work's internal architecture (Genette, p. 255). Seymour Chatman, in discussing the narrator's intervention into discourse, identifies a critical distinction: "The key difference in discursive commentary lies in whether it disrupts the fictional narrative structure." He terms the former "self-conscious narration" (p. 248), citing Robert Alter's explanation: self-conscious novels not only tell a story but also deliberately expose their own artifice and construction. Such works, through narrative style, manipulation of perspective, character naming, narrative techniques, and the orchestration of events, continually unveil to readers how the author builds a fictional world grounded in literary traditions and conventions (p. 250). In *Wuthering Heights*, Lockwood functions solely as a frame narrator, serving as an entry point for readers to encounter the strangeness of Wuthering Heights (Wang, pp. 43-44). Nelly, as the internal narrator, compensates for Lockwood's limitations by providing granular details of the story (Yuan, pp. 65-67). Through her deft use of non-linear narrative structures, Nelly fractures the fictional narrative's organization, and weaves together the tangled relationships along with emotional conflicts among the characters at Wuthering Heights like an invisible thread. That's where she spared no efforts to persuade readers to accept her constructed textual meaning and thereby asserting her independent presence as a narrator.

In the novel, Nelly reconstructs past events and interweaves plotlines through her dialogues with Lockwood. As a witness spanning three generations of two families, her narration transcends temporal and spatial constraints, granting her a flexible, almost omniscient God-like perspective. This is evident in her reflective reminiscences and the frequent foreshadowing embedded in her narrative discourse. As a mediator, Nelly repeatedly intervenes in young Catherine's meetings with Linton. When she discovers their secret correspondence and Cathy's "foolish, fanciful affection for the son of a person who would be glad to have him in his grave," Nelly concludes that Cathy's actions will distress Edgar and worsen his illness: "I'll not disguise, but you might kill him" (E. Brontë, p. 217). Even after Cathy vows to love her father more than Linton, Nelly remains skeptical, admonishing, "But deeds must

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prove it also... remember you don't forget the resolutions formed in the hour of fear." Though ostensibly a caution against Cathy's youthful impulsiveness, this statement is an omen of the tragic trajectory: during Nelly's illness, Cathy secretly meets Linton, ultimately becoming a pawn in Heathcliff's scheme to seize Thrushcross Grange, lured into marriage by Linton's deceit. As an in-between for the Earnshaw and Linton families, Nelly, having witnessed the passions and vendettas of the older generation, anticipates the dire consequences of Cathy's entanglement with Linton. Her narration of this episode is strategically structured with prescient insight, planting seeds of their clandestine meetings early on: "She fretted and sighed, and looked at her watch till eight… The following night she seemed more impatient still; on the third from recovering my company…" (p. 230). By positioning herself as an observer level with the reader, Nelly initially recounts her own bewilderment, "objectively" describing Cathy's agitated demeanor and actions—her flushed cheeks and trembling fingers—while withholding explicit judgment. Only later, upon uncovering the secret rendezvous, does Nelly retrospectively decode these subtle signs as evidence of Cathy's daring rebellion: braving the harsh moorland to meet Linton.

Nelly's initial misinterpretation mirrors the reader's experience. Early descriptions of Cathy's restless eagerness to visit Wuthering Heights leave readers perplexed. Yet when Nelly later reveals Cathy's true motive—to secretly visit the ailing Linton—the revelation feels organic, as such defiance would inevitably provoke Edgar and Nelly's opposition. Nelly's illness, ironically, grants Cathy the opportunity to slip away undetected: she honors her pact with Linton without facing paternal reproach. The eventual unveiling of this secret resolves the earlier narrative ambiguities, logically explaining Cathy's fretful demeanor. Though fully aware of the story's direction, Nelly refrains from overt disclosure. Instead, she layers hints and prompts readers to decode Cathy's seemingly innocuous actions, by means of which her narrative ingenuity in tightening the plot's cohesion is rooted in our mind. Through careful observation and description of Cathy's behavior, Nelly provides clues for readers to reconstruct motivations and emotional shifts, extending their aesthetic engagement. This strategy not only emphasizes her profound insight into the narrative's direction but also reinforces her authority as a narrator, establishing reader trust and making her ethical ideas better accepted.

In intervening into discourse, the narrator also consciously imposes ethical presuppositions and choices on narrative modes, aligning with Booth's concept of "controlling emotional tone." As Li Junjian observes, a narrator's (or implied author's) commentary can "manipulate reader responses, eliminate unnecessary interpretive obstacles, and persuade readers to willingly identify with and accept the narrated content, thereby achieving spiritual resonance between author and reader" (p. 265). In Nelly's narrative, she preconditions an emotional and ethical atmosphere before threading plotlines. Though these foreshadowing exist outside the immediate text and do not disrupt the narrative flow, they "establish a tonal framework for ethical judgment" (Wu, "Narrator Intervention and Narrative Ethics in the Context of Modernity." 180–183). When readers scrutinize Nelly's interventions, they sense an ethical attitude and value system that transcends her explicit discourse. Three years after Heathcliff's

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disappearance, his return to Thrushcross Grange is described by Nelly as a "continual nightmare" and "an oppression past explaining" (E. Brontë. p. 101). This unease compels readers to speculate: How will this "stray sheep" roam? What schemes lurk beneath his calm façade? Subsequent events unfold under this tension, amplified by Nelly's overtly negative epithets—"a bird of bad omen" (p. 97), "an evil beast" (101)—which relentlessly project her moral condemnation of Heathcliff's vengeance. In contrast, Nelly's portrayal of Edgar Linton exudes compassion: "Not to grieve a kind master, I learned to be less touchy" (86). This reveals both her dutiful loyalty as a housekeeper and her innate affinity for a "kind, trustful, and honourable" gentleman (101), mirroring her adherence to societal hierarchies and moral norms. Her declaration—"My heart invariably cleaved to the master's" (101)—reinforces her self-fashioned image of loyalty, affirming her alignment with genteel virtues and class-bound ethics.

Moreover, Nelly wields control over narrative rhythm. Through her exchanges with Lockwood, she gradually deepens the narrative (Huang, pp. 104-108). As a guide, she strategically halts her recollections during climactic moments or transitional junctures, heightening suspense. For instance, when Heathcliff storms out into the rain, and Catherine faces the dilemma of marrying Edgar, Nelly abruptly suspends the tale—"she would not hear of staying a second longer" (p. 84)—shifting the setting to Thrushcross Grange, only to resume three years later with his return. This interruption stokes reader anticipation for Catherine's marital life and curiosity about Heathcliff's fate. Nelly's narrative thrives on pauses that manipulate reader emotion. She frequently digresses, then circles back to the main plot. Examples include: Interrupting Catherine and Heathcliff's final meeting: "But here is Kenneth; I'll go down and tell him how much better you're" (p. 146). Diverting to mundane exchanges with Lockwood: "I did not think, at another twelve months' end, I should be amusing a stranger to the family with relating them" (240). Foreshadowing pivotal turns: "his [Heathcliff] efforts redoubling the more imminently his avaricious and unfeeling plans were threatened..." (p. 243). Unlike earlier instances requiring reader conjecture, here Nelly explicitly reveals Heathcliff's malevolent intentions: "I could not picture a father treating a dying child as tyrannically and wickedly as I afterwards learnt..." (p. 243). This prolepsis, rooted in the dialogue between Nelly's narrating self (recounting the past) and experiencing self (living through events), leverages her retrospective knowledge to steer reader interpretation. By the twist of temporal layers and modulating pace, Nelly creates space for reflection, allowing readers to distinguish between characters, events, and her digressions, all while asserting her authoritative presence as the narrative's architect.

Another distinctive intervention is the narrator's "covert manipulation" embedded within the text—metatextual annotations (or footnotes). This "deconstructive" form of intervention into narrative discourse (Tan, "Narrator Intervention and Ideology in Narrative Works." 212) is often criticized for "damaging the text," disrupting the plot, and hindering readers' fluid reading experience. However, it is also intrinsically linked to the narrator's unique moral philosophy and value judgments, serving a narrative ethical function. Unlike judgmental interventions that directly impose ethical orientations, metatextual annotations operate more "implicitly and covertly" (Wu, "Narrator Intervention and

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Narrative Ethics in the Context of Modernity." 181), intended to elicit readers' resonance. In the novel, Brontë employs parentheses as a tool for Nelly's self-defense. For instance, when Nelly disobeys Catherine's orders and remains present during Linton's visit, she inserts a parenthetical justification: "(Mr. Hindley had given me directions to make a third party in any private visits Linton chose to pay)" (E. Brontë, p. 65). This annotation legitimizes Nelly's defiance, upholding her image as a loyal servant and positioning her as the ostensibly aggrieved party in subsequent conflicts with Catherine, thereby condemning Catherine's overbearness and irrationality. The use of typographical emphasis further underscores Nelly's explicit personal stance. When justifying her contrasting attitudes toward Linton and Catherine, she states: "for he was kind, and trustful, and honourable; and she—she could not be called *the opposite*" (p. 86). Though Nelly avoids explicitly labeling Catherine as Linton's antithesis, the emphasized "opposite" subtly highlights their perceived opposition, covertly steering readers to reflect on their moral differences.

4. Nelly's Ethical Positioning: The Latent Agent

In the narrator's intervention into the story, the narrator's value orientation is laid bare through moral evaluations of events and characters. Such evaluative commentary constitutes "explanations and interpretations grounded in psychological, spiritual, or ethical assessments" (Chatman, p. 237). Chatman defines intervention into the story through three dimensions: Explanation: The explicit articulation of the essence, connections, or significance of story elements; Judgment: The expression of moral or value-laden viewpoints; And Generalization: Extending insights from the fictional world to the real world, invoking either "universal truths" or historical facts. Ultimately, these interventions serve to communicate the narrator's preferred ethical principles and value systems to the reader.

Explanatory commentary, as a form of narrator intervention, includes all interpretive work directly tied to character portrayal and event elaboration. David Herman notes that *Wuthering Heights*' two primary narrators, Lockwood and Nelly Dean, are homodiegetic yet diverge sharply in personality and modes of engagement (pp. 39-40). Upon arriving at Wuthering Heights, Lockwood misreads its atmosphere through aristocratic arrogance: he dismisses Heathcliff's rudeness as "eccentricity," attributes the estate's desolation to its owner's "lack of taste and refinement" (E. Brontë, p. 2), and views Catherine's diary as "scribble" (15). Such misjudgments expose his naivety toward marginalized lives. His role as an external observer, juxtaposed with Nelly's internal recollections, bridges his cognitive gaps, directing the narrative toward "inner truths" and doubly securing the story's authenticity (Huang 104–108), thereby deconstructing the authority of a singular narrative. Nelly's explanatory discourse further elevates her role as an interpreter. When recounting Heathcliff's origins, she clarifies that "Heathcliff" was "the name of a son who died in childhood [of the Earnshaws], and it has served him ever since, both for Christian and surname" (E. Brontë, p. 34). This naming signifies Heathcliff's immediate loss of legitimate identity—he is merely a "replacement" for Mr. Earnshaw's deceased son, cementing his "Otherness" at Wuthering Heights. It naturalizes Hindley's hatred since Heathcliff is "a

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usurper of his father's affections and privileges" (p. 34). Such details impress readers with Heathcliff's status as a foundling, described upon arrival as "a dirty, ragged, black-haired child" who "repeated some gibberish nobody could understand" (p. 33). These descriptions imply his racialized identity (possibly Gypsy), intensifying his conflict with Hindley and Edgar beyond class to colonial-era racial politics. Mr. Earnshaw's view of the "dark-skinned child" from Liverpool as "a gift of God, though it's as dark almost as if it came from the devil" (33) further cements his Otherness, with Nelly's use of "devil" foreshadowing his perceived malevolence. Nelly's explanations presage Heathcliff's existential dislocation. As a Gypsy foundling rejected by the community, he becomes a "stray sheep there to its own wicked wanderings" (101), culminating in his realization that "the will to lift a slate off either roof has vanished!" and his admission that "it is a poor conclusion" (303). This trajectory, shaped by Nelly's commentary, guides the tragedy of his rebellion.

In depicting Catherine and Heathcliff's final farewell, Nelly's observations are visceral: Catherine dies "with a sweet smile… wandered back to pleasant early days" (158), while Heathcliff, "compressing his mouth he held a silent combat with his inward agony, defying, meanwhile, my sympathy with a ferocious stare," appears "like a savage beast getting goaded to death with knives and spears" (157-158). Through Nelly's standpoint, their stark contrasts emerge: Catherine's unbridled longing for freedom versus Heathcliff's obsessive love and internalized torment. Her narrative voice exemplifies Booth's intervention techniques—"providing factual images or summaries" and "elevating the significance of events"—deepening our understanding of Heathcliff's identity and magnifying the moral dimensions of his vengeful rebellion.

Judgmental Intervention refers to the narrator's moral and value-laden evaluations of characters, often infused with personal bias and emotional undertones to strengthen ethical sympathy for the narrator. James Phelan emphasizes ethical judgment—the assessment of the moral value of characters and events (10). He argues that narrative texts, whether implicitly or explicitly, construct their own ethical frameworks to guide readers toward specific moral conclusions. Thus, in rhetorical ethics, ethical judgments emerge from the text's internal logic and extend outward to the real world (Bao 21). In *Wuthering Heights*, Nelly, as the narrator, not only provides "images" or summaries of the story but also pilots readers' moral evaluations of characters and events through her judgmental interventions. Nelly consciously embeds her own value judgments into her narrative discourse, frequently issuing moral assessments of characters. For instance, she describes Catherine as "a wild, wicked slip" prone to "act the little mistress, using her hands freely, and commanding her companions" (E. Brontë 38), and later as "saucier and more passionate, and haughtier than ever" (83), requiring others to "humour her caprices." Notably, Nelly's negative critiques of Catherine's arrogance stem from her own ethical perspective as a lower-class servant and their hierarchical master-servant dynamic, revealing inherent bias. As a servant, her narrative inherently upholds class hierarchies. Influenced by Victorian-era class rigidity and gendered norms, her disparagement of Heathcliff exposes societal exclusion of the underclass, while her praise for Linton's "respectability" and "refinement" tacitly is in line with

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bourgeois hypocrisy. Conversely, Nelly dismisses Catherine's emotional turmoil in her romantic entanglements: "I've had many a laugh at her perplexities and untold troubles," justifying her indifference by asserting, "she was so proud, it became really impossible to pity her distresses" (p. 62). The novel's Victorian context emphasized "the sanctity of marriage and family, with a wife's paramount duty being to serve her husband with gentleness and purity" (Li, p. 340). Catherine's willfulness, caprice, and lack of refinement render her an outlier in this milieu, subtly critiquing patriarchal constraints (Jiang & Zhao, pp. 67-72). Nelly's portrayal of Catherine's "madness" and hysteria mirrors Victorian repression of female emotion. Bound by her class allegiance, Nelly struggles to sympathize with Catherine's defiance, for which threatens her role as a dutiful servant. Also Edgar's gentleness unfavorably contrasts with Catherine's brashness. Their differences in character naturally account for Nelly's narrative bias toward him, shaping readers' ethical sympathy for her position. Moreover, the clash between the two households symbolizes the contradiction between nature and civilization (Chen, pp. 69-73). Nelly's defense of Edgar reflects her alignment with "civilized" morality, while her condemnation of Catherine's primal vigor attempts to frame wild, natural emotions within a moralistic framework. Such varying opinions prove Victorian industrial order's suppression of human nature. Yet readers must critically evaluate these imposed judgments. Confronted with the narrator's ideological interjections, readers must discern whether the narrator's moral stance aligns with the implied author's to distinguish reliable from unreliable narration: "A reliable narrator speaks and acts in accordance with the work's normative values (i.e., the implied author's), while an unreliable narrator does not" (Booth, "Distance and Point-of-View: An Essay in Classification." p. 244). As both storyteller and participant, Nelly inevitably foregrounds her subjective consciousness, often self-aggrandizing as a paragon of loyalty, compassion, and diligence to validate her version of events. She proclaims, "the Grange had but one sensible soul in its walls, and that lodged in my body" (E. Brontë, 113), asserting her moral authority. Her defense of withholding Catherine's illness—"I believed no such thing, so I kept it to myself" (p. 113)—masks self-interest under a veneer of loyalty: "I did not wish him [Edgar] to yield" (p. 112). When Nelly's judgments carry overt emotional bias, readers must interrogate her motives and be soberly aware that her voice does not equate to the implied author's. Her partiality compels readers to penetrate the superficial moralizing and requires deeper engagement with the text's ethical ambiguities in order to understand the complexities of human nature.

In the narrator's intervention as generalization, the novel extensively invokes so-called "universal truths," comparing fictional events to real-world realities (Chatman, p. 237). Here, the narrator's discourse transcends the text to connect with the external world. In this context, it shapes beliefs and asserts truths by revealing characters' inner motivations. Though Nelly's commentary is filtered through bias and preconceptions, her reliability remains questionable, yet Brontë imbues her with moments of humanistic insight, granting her evaluative discourse universal resonance. Nelly critiques young Catherine's unfair treatment of Hareton: "Had you been brought up in his circumstances, would

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you be less rude?... and I'm hurt that he should be despised now, because that case Heathcliff has treated him so unjustly" (E. Brontë, 234). She refuses to deem Hareton inherently inferior, attributing his demeanor to environmental constraints. Her recollections blend reproach with empathy, and she laments Heathcliff's wretched situation because of Hindley's abuse. She encourages Heathcliff to reclaim dignity: "A good heart will help you to a bonny face… Were I in your place, I'd frame high notions of my birth. The thought of what I was should give me courage to support the oppressions of a little farmer" (p. 53). Her early sympathy for Heathcliff's oppression informs her defense of his humanity against Isabella's demonization: "He's a human being… Be more charitable; there are worse men than he is yet" (p. 163). This statement transcends mere pity, encapsulating the novel's exploration of moral complexity. Nelly urges readers toward compassion, acknowledging the interplay of good and evil within all individuals, shaped by their struggles. Through her viewpoint, Heathcliff emerges as multidimensional—neither wholly villainous nor blameless—a product of societal cruelty and personal anguish. Though Nelly's judgments seem spontaneous, they suggest the implied author's ethical voice. Despite Hindley's brutality and self-destruction, she mourns him as a "foster brother," grieving "as if for a blood relation" (p. 175). She implores Heathcliff to show Linton kindness, "he's all you have akin in this wide world" (p. 196), and upon Heathcliff's death, reflects with "a sort of oppressive sadness" (315). Her compassionate tone advocates for human redemption, aligning with Brontë's moral vision. While the novel does not echo Emily Brontë's life directly, biographical parallels resonate. When her brother Branwell was afflicted with disease, Emily devotedly cared for him, her own health deteriorating from grief. Nelly's ineffable empathy for Hareton and Heathcliff echoes this authorial tenderness, suggesting Brontë's own ethical sensibilities permeate the narrative.

5. Ethics and Aesthetics in Narrative Voice

The interplay between ethical judgment and aesthetic value in literary texts is intricate and delicate. In *Wuthering Heights*, Nelly's narrative voice sways/fluctuates between ethical and aesthetic dimensions, offering a unique point of view to examine this relationship. The author posits that the infusion of ethical judgment within the narrative process enhances its aesthetic value. Ethical and aesthetic dimensions in literary narratives are inextricably linked. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, in the opening of *Aesthetica*, defines aesthetics as the "science of sensory cognition" and the aesthetic as "thinking in a beautiful manner" (2). Aesthetic engagement necessitates the interaction between a perceiving subject and an aesthetic object, generating subjective psychological activities and value judgments. The aesthetic response itself associates with pleasure, pity, fear, indignation, and other complex emotions. If ethical, political, or religious elements were stripped from literature, the residual "pure" sensory pleasure would ring hollow. Thus, literature must involve both beauty and moral sensibility. American critic Wayne C. Booth argues that fiction inherently carries ethical values: "No story can be told without a scale of values" (Wu, "Narrative Ethics: A New Path for Ethical Criticism." 127). He asserts that "any event worth telling, any sequence of human time, must arise from a conflict

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between at least two choices—often contradictory—each laden with ethical assumptions: without conflict, there is no event," and that "all narratives are 'didactic'" (Booth, *The Company We Keep：A Ethics of Fiction* 151). In this view, narrative form is inseparable from human meaning and moral judgment, as ethics and storytelling share an organic, intrinsic bond (Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* 441). Adam Zachary Newton, an American scholar, coined the term narrative ethics, positing an inseparable logical relationship between narrative and ethics: "narrative as ethics" (Li Yuanqiao 51–59). In *Wuthering Heights*, Nelly, as a "fair narrator" (E. Brontë 147), permeates her narrative with moral implications and ethical orientations through her portrayal of characters and plot orchestration. Her moral stance is omnipresent, woven into her discourse construction. For readers, these latent ethical voices—whether reflecting the author's design or contemporary moral norms—constitute a distinctive reading experience.

James Phelan's rhetorical narrative theory establishes two key aesthetic criteria: (1) Formal Innovation: A narrative that employs challenging formal structures achieves greater aesthetic merit than one adhering to conventional forms. (2) Ethical Complexity: A narrative that engages readers in ethical dilemmas combined with formal complexity exceeds simplistic binaries of good and evil (Bao 23–24). *Wuthering Heights* illustrates this through its unique narrative architecture. The story unfolds via a frame narrative: Lockwood, the tenant, introduces the tale, which Nelly, the housekeeper, then recounts in full (Guo 25–26). This structure amplifies mystery and attraction, while temporal dislocations—flashbacks and embedded narratives—challenge readers. Nelly's voice, tinged with sympathy and resignation toward Heathcliff's fate, oscillates between ethical reflection and emotional ambivalence. Readers wander in shifting temporal layers, gradually reconstructing the story like piecing together a complex and enigmatic puzzle. This process heightens engagement, inviting readers to discover hidden connections and experience the text's aesthetic richness through active exploration.

Nelly's narrative, through its portrayal of moral dilemmas and characters' ethical choices, makes it possible to arouse profound emotional resonance. In *Wuthering Heights*, characters frequently confront ethical crossroads: intense love versus hatred, wilderness versus civilization, good versus evil, self versus societal expectations, and Heathcliff's vengeance versus conscience. By interpreting these multifaceted ethical struggles and fraught decisions, the novel examines moral obligations and ethical significance. When Catherine confides in Nelly about her fervent love for Heathcliff, Nelly's response was "out of patience with her folly" (E. Brontë 77). To the "civilized world," Catherine's passion, anguish, and defiance are mere tantrums of a selfish, immature girl. Nelly condemns Catherine's decision to marry Edgar as a "terrible" act driven by vanity and social ambition, accusing her of "ignoring marital responsibilities" (77). Though Nelly fails to grasp Catherine's inner torment or her soul-deep bond with Heathcliff, she warns that Catherine's betrayal will render Heathcliff "the most unfortunate creature that ever was born" (76). In this romantic quandary, Nelly positions herself as a moral arbiter. She views Catherine's acceptance of Edgar's proposal not as love but as a transactional bid for status, denouncing her motives as "wicked and unprincipled" (77). Nelly cannot comprehend

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Catherine's wild, transcendent love for Heathcliff—a product of the clash between personal desire and societal norms. This type of love defies class and convention, whereas her Victorian sensibilities demand marriage grounded in reason and tradition, not passion or individual will. Thus, she rejects Catherine's defiance of moral codes and regards her emotional intensity as irrational and destructive. Nelly's perspective is the embodiment of Victorian marital pragmatism, where unions were social contracts rather than romantic choices. By embedding these biases into her narrative, Brontë exposes the era's rigid moral frameworks, inviting readers to question societal values through Catherine and Heathcliff's tragic rebellion.

Nelly's moral presence in her narrative also reflects the author's ethical-aesthetic vision. *Wuthering Heights* functions as Nelly's familial chronicle, tracing Heathcliff's journey from abused foundling to vengeful outcast. Correlated with love, betrayal, and moral ambiguity, the novel resists simplistic judgments, and places readers among ethical paradoxes. Nelly refuses to reduce characters to "hero" or "villain"; instead, she sways between sympathy and condemnation to maintain a well-designed distance that transcends rigid moral binaries. This complexity transforms the novel into a meditation on moral relativism, where "good" and "evil" become fluid constructs shaped by circumstance and perspective. By leaving ethical conclusions open, Brontë compels readers to grapple with moral ambiguity. Heathcliff's vengeance, for instance, is both a rebellion against systemic injustice and a quest for dignity—a duality Nelly acknowledges even as she condemns his cruelty. Emily Brontë subtly infuses Nelly's narrative with existential inquiry, framing Heathcliff's suffering as a critique of societal oppression. This "ethics of survival" (Xie 24–30) prioritizes human resilience over moral absolutism, urging readers to confront the raw humanity beneath societal labels.

In summary, Nelly's narrative artistry—marked by foreshadowing, nonlinear chronology, and emotional nuance—heightens the novel's aesthetic tension and suspense. Simultaneously, her ethical judgments touch the boundaries of morality and compassion. Her empathy towards Hareton and Heathcliff's tragic destiny deepens the work's humanistic dignity. As her voice bridges ethics and aesthetics, *Wuthering Heights* goes beyond a tale of passion and becomes a profound ethical drama.

6. Conclusion

As the primary narrative agent, Nelly mediates readers' connection to the story. Her recollections are not mere retellings but curated interpretations shaped by commentary, speculative psychology, and selective revelation. As both participant and narrator, she wields discursive authority to justify her actions, and leads readers toward her moral judgement to guarantee that the narrative receivers' value judgments are in conformity to the implied authors' intention. Though her reliability is disputed due to the narrative intervention, her empathy for Hareton and Heathcliff channels Brontë's own ethical voice equally, which makes the novel's themes universal. Nelly's interventions—subtle subtexts, temporal juxtapositions, and emotional cues—heighten reader engagement and balance ethical rigor with aesthetic pleasure. By interweaving moral reasoning and narrative innovation, *Wuthering Heights*

emerges as both a literary masterpiece and a timeless exploration of human complexity, securing its place as a cornerstone of ethical and aesthetic discourse.

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