Wuthering Heights: Elements Of Romantic Novel

Wuthering Heights (1847) by Emily Brontë may be described by critics as the ‘last great Romantic novel’ due to the fact although it was technically published within the Victorian era of literature, it contains many characteristics of Romantic literature. Chronologically, it sits within the Victorian period, but its content is Romantic. Romanticism is the name given to a powerful movement in literature and the other arts – including music and painting – during the period from the 1770s to the mid-nineteenth century. Since at least the 1820s, definitions of Romanticism have been sent aloft, shot down, repaired, relaunched, parodied, abandoned, rediscovered, finally laid to rest, and then revived from the dead through countless different cycles of scholarship and journalism.

The rise of Romanticism began when the Industrial Revolution took over mainland Europe and as the world turned more towards logic, reason, and observable fact, Romanticism rebelled with the world of the supernatural and fantasy. According to critics, the Romanticism period can be characterized chiefly by a reaction against neoclassicism and the emphasis on the imagination or emotions. In Wuthering Heights this could not be more apparent with the ghost of Catherine Earnshaw often popping up throughout the latter part of the text. On top of this, readers are introduced to the remarkably realistic hallucinations or visions experienced by many a character within the novel, a prime example being Mr. Lockwood.

The most evident, reoccurring characteristic within Wuthering Heights which critics may relate to those of texts from the Romanticism era, is the theme of the Gothic sublime. There is a lot of darkness within this novel which points critics to the conclusion that it belongs to the Gothic category. According to writer David Morris, in exploring the intertwining between love and terror, the typical Gothic novel is exclaimed to pursue a version of the sublime utterly without transcendence. It is a vertiginous and plunging sublime, which takes readers deep within rather than far beyond the human sphere. The eighteenth-century sublime continuously implied (but managed to restrain) the threat of losing control. Gothic sublimity - by releasing into fiction images and desires which were previously suppressed in literature, deeply hidden and coerced into silence - greatly intensifies the dangers of the uncontrollable release from restraints. Such dangers undoubtedly help to explain why censorship and swooning were among the most common social responses to Gothic texts during this period.

Dark Romanticism, just as the name would suggest, takes a darker approach that focuses more on tragedy and horror. Wuthering Heights does not exactly contain characters that one would tend to look up to, they are violent and can often be intentionally very cruel to one another; not the type that would essentially restore one’s faith in humankind. On top of this, the countryside is often a popular choice of setting for romantic novels, but the barren and desolate setting of Wuthering Heights with its deadly weather is again, not quite the idealistic visions of beauty and simplicity which one would expect. Wuthering Heights contains plenty of chilling Gothic features including imprisonment, dark stairways, stormy weather, nightmares, extreme landscapes and settings, melancholy figures, moonlight and candles, torture and evidence of excessive cruelty, necrophilia, a supernatural presence, maniacal behavior, communication between the living and the dead, etc. which are very common physical elements within dark, Gothic Romantic literature.