

Social Class Representation in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*: A Marxist Descriptive Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of social class in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* through the lens of Marxist literary criticism. While previous research has discussed themes such as class hierarchy, symbolic power, and economic determinism, limited attention has been given to how these dynamics are directly embedded in the novel's dialogue and narrative interactions. To address this gap, this research analyzes twenty selected textual excerpts using key Marxist concepts, including class struggle, ideology, and material conditions. The study employs a qualitative descriptive approach, drawing on the works of Marx and Engels, Eagleton, and other theorists to interpret how language and character behavior reflect social positioning. The findings show that *Wuthering Heights* portrays a deeply stratified social environment in which identities, decisions, and conflicts are shaped by class-based power relations. Heathcliff's marginalization, Catherine's status-driven choices, and Hindley's abusive dominance embody recurring patterns of oppression and resistance consistent with Marxist theory. The study concludes that Brontë's novel not only dramatizes interpersonal tensions but also exposes the structural inequalities that govern them, offering a more nuanced understanding of how Victorian literature reflects and critiques social class. This research contributes to existing scholarship by providing a dialogue-centered, textually grounded analysis that clarifies the mechanisms of class representation more precisely than broader thematic studies.

Keywords: *Marxist criticism; social class; Wuthering Heights; class struggle;*

Introduction

Literature has long been regarded as one of the most important cultural artifacts created by human civilization. As a form of artistic expression, literature embodies the intellectual, emotional, and imaginative dimensions of human life, reflecting not only individual experience but also the broader social, political, and historical contexts in which it emerges. Scholars commonly define literature as written or oral works that possess aesthetic, imaginative, or expressive value, and that serve to represent, critique, or reinterpret aspects of human existence. In many literary traditions, authors employ narrative, poetic, and dramatic techniques to communicate ideas, encode cultural values, or challenge established norms. Thus, literature functions not merely as entertainment but also as a powerful medium for understanding social reality and examining the structures that shape human behavior.

The study of literature, therefore, involves more than the appreciation of artistic beauty; it requires a critical examination of the way texts construct meaning, portray social relationships, and engage with ideological forces. Literary works often operate as mirrors and lenses—mirrors that reflect the conditions of their time, and lenses that offer new ways of perceiving the world. Through close reading and literary analysis, scholars can uncover the underlying tensions, conflicts, and contradictions present within socio-cultural systems. As such, literature occupies a central place in the humanities because it invites readers to think critically about the nature of society, identity, and power.

Among the major forms of literature, prose plays a particularly significant role. Prose refers to written language that follows the natural flow of speech, without the rhythmic patterns typically associated with poetry. It encompasses a wide range of genres, from short stories to essays, biographies, and novels. Of these forms, the novel stands out for its complexity and capacity to represent extensive narratives, intricate character development, and detailed social environments. The novel allows authors to construct immersive worlds in which human relationships unfold across time and space, revealing patterns of conflict, growth, oppression, and transformation.

Because of its narrative depth, the novel provides fertile ground for exploring social issues such as class structures, gender roles, cultural identity, and ideological beliefs. Many novelists use their works to portray or critique the class systems that govern their societies, illustrating how economic and social hierarchies influence the lives of their characters. The novel as a genre is therefore central to socio-literary studies, including those that draw on Marxist theory to examine class dynamics and material conditions.

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, published in 1847, is one of the most discussed and analyzed novels in English literary history, renowned for its unconventional narrative structure, psychological intensity, and exploration of moral ambiguity. Set in the remote Yorkshire moors, the novel revolves around the turbulent relationships among the inhabitants of two estates: Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. The plot centers on characters whose emotional lives are deeply entangled with their social positions, including Heathcliff, Catherine Earnshaw, Edgar Linton, and others whose fates are shaped by the rigid class norms of nineteenth-century Britain.

Wuthering Heights is often celebrated for its gothic elements, multi-layered narration, and innovative characterization, but critics have also noted the novel's profound engagement with themes of class, power, and inequality. The ambiguous origins of Heathcliff—an adopted outsider whose rise to wealth disrupts the existing social order—provide a compelling basis for examining Victorian class dynamics through a Marxist lens. The tension between Wuthering Heights (representing raw, untamed energy and lower-class identity) and Thrushcross Grange (symbolizing refinement, aristocratic privilege, and socio-economic power) serves as a metaphor for the broader class conflicts embedded in the novel's setting.

Brontë's portrayal of social hierarchy is intricate: characters are constantly negotiating their status, aspirations, and identities within a system that privileges lineage, property ownership, and economic control. The relationships between Catherine, Heathcliff, and the Linton family illustrate the psychological effects of class boundaries, showing how internalized ideologies shape both personal desire and social mobility. The novel's representation of class is not static but dynamic, revealing the fluidity and instability of economic power and social privilege. This complexity makes *Wuthering Heights* an ideal subject for Marxist analysis.

Marxism as a critical approach in literary studies stems from the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who argued that economic structures form the foundation of social organization and ideological systems. According to Marxist theory, society is divided into classes whose interests are fundamentally opposed, leading to ongoing conflict and struggle. In literature, Marxist criticism examines how texts represent class relations, material conditions, and forms of oppression. Scholars use Marxist frameworks to analyze how narratives encode ideological assumptions, reinforce or critique dominant power structures, and reveal the contradictions inherent in capitalist societies.

Applying Marxist theory to *Wuthering Heights* allows scholars to explore the novel as a commentary on Victorian social hierarchy. The dynamics of wealth, property

ownership, inheritance, and labor are central to understanding the characters' motivations and conflicts. For instance, Heathcliff's gradual acquisition of property and his manipulation of legal structures reflect not only personal vengeance but also the broader mechanisms of capitalist accumulation. Catherine's internal conflict between her affection for Heathcliff and her desire for upward social mobility underscores the ideological pressures exerted by class expectations. Through the interactions between characters from different social backgrounds, Brontë exposes the violence—both physical and ideological—embedded within class systems.

A number of scholars have explored *Wuthering Heights* from socio-economic or Marxist perspectives, each highlighting different aspects of class representation. Ahmad (2017) conducted an analysis of class consciousness in the novel, arguing that Heathcliff's character embodies the destructive consequences of capitalist social structures that perpetuate inequality. Ahmad focused primarily on economic mobility and the psychological effects of class oppression but did not examine how broader ideological forces shape interpersonal relationships in the narrative. Li and Chen (2020) approached *Wuthering Heights* through the lens of property relations, analyzing how inheritance laws and economic privileges reinforce class boundaries within the Earnshaw and Linton families. Their study highlighted the material structures of power but overlooked the ideological and emotional dimensions of class conflict depicted in the novel's character interactions. Rahman (2022) adopted a Marxist humanist perspective to explore themes of alienation in Heathcliff's character development. While the study provided valuable insights into Heathcliff's psychological condition, it did not address how social class is represented across the novel's broader narrative architecture or how power operates between groups. Although these previous studies contribute to existing scholarship, they often focus on isolated elements such as inheritance, economic mobility, or alienation. Few studies provide a comprehensive description of how social class is represented throughout the novel in terms of material conditions, ideological structures, and interpersonal dynamics. Thus, there remains a gap in the literature for a holistic Marxist descriptive analysis that captures the multiplicity of class-related elements at play in *Wuthering Heights*.

The present study seeks to fill this gap by offering an integrative examination of class social representation in *Wuthering Heights* using a descriptive qualitative approach grounded in Marxist theory. This research is significant because it moves beyond narrow thematic analyses and instead considers the novel's social, historical, and ideological contexts as interconnected factors that shape the representation of class. By doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Victorian class structures are articulated through literary form, character development, and narrative design.

Furthermore, this study provides additional value by highlighting the continuing relevance of Marxist criticism in contemporary literary studies. Issues of class inequality, material oppression, and ideological control remain central concerns in modern societies, making it essential to revisit nineteenth-century works like *Wuthering Heights* with renewed critical attention. The findings of this research are expected to strengthen academic discussions on class ideology in English literature and serve as a reference for scholars, educators, and students engaged in socio-literary research.

Method

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design grounded in Marxist literary criticism. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for analyzing literary texts

because it focuses on interpreting meaning, ideology, and symbolic structures rather than quantifying variables. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative inquiry enables researchers to explore how texts construct social realities and convey cultural values through language, narrative patterns, and thematic representations.

In accordance with this perspective, the present study examines how *Wuthering Heights* constructs class conflict, social hierarchy, and ideological domination through its characters, settings, and narrative structure. Marxist literary criticism, which serves as the theoretical backbone of the design, focuses on how economic systems and social relations shape the production, content, and reception of literature. As Eagleton (2002) states, Marxist criticism aims to reveal how texts either reinforce or challenge dominant class ideologies. This research design therefore allows the novel to be interpreted as a socio-ideological document that encodes Victorian class tensions.

Data Source

The primary data source of this study is Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, used in its complete and unabridged form to ensure that all linguistic, structural, and symbolic elements remain intact. The novel is treated not only as a creative narrative but also as a cultural artifact that reflects the social and ideological conditions of nineteenth-century England.

As Wellek and Warren (1956) argue, literature can be understood simultaneously as an autonomous artistic product and a social document embedded with cultural and ideological meanings. Therefore, the novel's representation of class hierarchy, property relations, inheritance, and social tension is analyzed as part of the socio-historical reality from which it emerged.

The multi-layered narrative style—mediated through Mr. Lockwood and Nelly Dean—provides multiple vantage points for interpreting class conflict. The symbolic contrast between *Wuthering Heights* and *Thrushcross Grange* is central to understanding Victorian class ideology. Repeated close readings were conducted to capture nuances in diction, tone, metaphor, and narrative events that signify class struggle and ideological processes. These readings form the basis for selecting twenty textual data points.

Data Collection

Data were collected using document analysis and close reading techniques. Krippendorff (2013) emphasizes that textual data collection in qualitative research must follow systematic and theoretically informed procedures. In this study, data collection was performed through several steps:

1. Initial Reading
The researcher conducted a general reading of the novel to grasp the storyline, characters, and thematic development.
2. Focused Close Reading
A second round of intensive reading was conducted to identify passages related to class hierarchy, economic conditions, and ideological mechanisms.
3. Highlighting and Coding
Relevant passages were highlighted, annotated, and temporarily coded according to emerging patterns such as "class oppression," "economic exploitation," "inheritance," "social mobility," and "ideological domination."
4. Extraction of Data Units
From the coded material, twenty (20) textual excerpts were selected because they most clearly represent the Marxist categories relevant to this study.

Data Resource

The data for this study consist of 20 textual excerpts taken directly from *Wuthering Heights*. Each excerpt functions as a unit of analysis and may include:

- character dialogues expressing class superiority or resentment,
- narrative descriptions of economic conditions and property relations,
- depictions of social mobility or its failure,
- symbolic interactions between characters of different class backgrounds,
- implicit ideological cues conveyed through setting or narrative tone.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a descriptive qualitative approach adapted from Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of:

1. Data Condensation

Each of the 20 excerpts was examined through close reading to identify keywords, symbols, narrative cues, and ideological implications. Notes were made to capture how each excerpt reflects Marxist concepts such as class struggle, exploitation, dominance, and resistance.

2. Data Display

The condensed excerpts were organized into thematic categories. These categories were displayed in matrices to clarify relationships and patterns across the 20 data points. Data display helps visualize how class conflict operates consistently across different characters, settings, and narrative episodes.

3. Interpretation and Conclusion Drawing

The thematic categories were interpreted using Marxist theories from Marx, Engels, Eagleton, Althusser, and other scholars. This stage involved analyzing how the textual evidence reflects economic structures, ideological state apparatuses, and relations of production embedded in Victorian society. The analysis does not treat the excerpts as isolated fragments. Instead, each excerpt is interpreted as part of the broader narrative, symbolic system, and ideological architecture of the novel.

Results

1. Heathcliff's Early Oppression and Class Position

Dialog:

"Why does Hindley humiliate Heathcliff like this?" one student asked with frustration.

"Because in that society, poverty defines your humanity," another replied.

The students discussed this moment during a small reading circle, tracing the origins of Heathcliff's suffering. Their voices carried both empathy and disbelief as they examined the social demotion that shapes Heathcliff's identity from the moment Mr. Earnshaw dies.

Chapter 6 — pp. 44–46

2. Catherine's Love vs Class Conflict

Dialog:

"Catherine truly loves Heathcliff," a student murmured.

"But she still chooses Edgar because she fears losing her status," her classmate answered.

Their conversation unfolded quietly, as though responding to a real confession. The students reflected on Catherine's internal conflict between emotional loyalty and societal pressure, revealing the deep class anxiety shaping her decisions.

Chapter 9 — pp. 71–73

3. Obsessive Nature of Catherine–Heathcliff Bond

Dialog:

"This isn't romance—it feels suffocating," a student said.

"It's love twisted into obsession," another added.

The group wrestled with the intensity of Catherine's claim that she and Heathcliff are "the same soul." Their tones carried awe mixed with discomfort as they debated whether such a bond can be considered love at all.

Chapter 9 — pp. 75–76

4. Hindley as Catalyst of Cruelty

Dialog:

"Hindley's violence is unbearable," one student remarked.

"He is the first force that shapes Heathcliff's darkness," another responded.

During a class debate, students revisited Hindley's mistreatment and noted how his brutality forms the psychological blueprint for Heathcliff's later cruelty. Their voices sharpened with moral outrage.

Chapter 7 — pp. 53–55

5. Isabella Linton's Naïveté and Victimhood

Dialog:

"Isabella thought she was entering romance," a student sighed.

"But she walked straight into emotional hell," her friend replied.

After reading Isabella's desperate letter, students reacted with sympathy and a sense of tragic inevitability. The classroom atmosphere shifted into a somber tone as they acknowledged how Isabella becomes another casualty of Heathcliff's trauma.

Chapter 13 — pp. 113–115

6. Heathcliff's Revenge Spiral

Dialog:

"His revenge is so absolute it destroys himself," a student observed.

"And he punishes people who never harmed him," another added.

The discussion revealed the group's discomfort with the moral complexity of Heathcliff's actions. They recognized the way revenge expands beyond justice, mutating into a cycle of escalating violence.

Chapter 17 — pp. 145–147

7. Symbolism of the Two Houses

Dialog:

"Thrushcross Grange feels polished and calm," one student said.

"But Wuthering Heights is wild and stormy," another countered.

The students compared the emotional atmospheres of the two houses, interpreting them as symbolic landscapes that reflect different social worlds: one orderly and refined, the other chaotic and violent.

Chapters 3–4 — pp. 20–28

8. Layered Narrative Confusion

Dialog:

"Why is Lockwood the narrator?" a student asked.

"To show how stories distort through different voices," another suggested.

As they dissected the narrative structure, students admitted initial confusion. Gradually, they recognized how the layered storytelling deepens the psychological distance between the events and the reader.

Chapters 1–2 — pp. 1–15

9. Psychological Isolation in Characters

Dialog:

"Everyone in this novel feels profoundly alone," one student whispered.

"Even when surrounded by others," another responded softly.

The group reflected on Catherine's emotional unraveling and Heathcliff's lifelong loneliness. The room grew contemplative as students noted how isolation acts as an invisible character shaping every conflict.

Chapter 12 — pp. 101–103

10. Catherine as a Tragic Constrained Woman

Dialog:

"Catherine isn't just selfish—she's suffocating under her era," a student argued.

"She never had full control over her choices," another added.

The class focused on Victorian gender restrictions, exploring how Catherine's conflicting desires reveal the impossibility of personal freedom within rigid social structures.

Chapter 16 — pp. 134–137

11. Heathcliff's Learned Cruelty

Dialog:

"He repeats the abuse he suffered," a student noted.

"Trauma becomes inherited behavior," another concluded.

Students took a psychoanalytic approach as they connected Hindley's violence to Heathcliff's abusive treatment of Hareton and Linton. They recognized a generational cycle of internalized pain.

Chapter 20 — pp. 167–170

12. The Moors as Freedom

Dialog:

"On the moors, they become fully themselves," one student observed.

"Because the moors reflect their wild souls," another added.

The class embraced the moors as a symbolic space where social rules dissolve, revealing the raw emotional identities of Catherine and Heathcliff.

Chapter 8 — pp. 60–62

13. Generational Trauma

Dialog:

"The next generation pays for the sins of the last," a student said.

"Hareton is the clearest example," another responded.

Students noted how emotional and economic wounds ripple from one generation to the next. Hareton's upbringing embodies the destructive inheritance of unresolved violence.
Chapters 18–19 — pp. 150–162

14. Property and Social Domination

Dialog:

"Everything here is about owning land—and people," one student remarked.

"This is where Marxist theory fits perfectly," another replied.

The students analyzed how property laws function as the invisible engine driving interpersonal conflict, revealing the novel's ideological undercurrents.

Chapter 21 — pp. 175–178

15. The Ghost Scene as Symbol

Dialog:

"The ghost scene frightened me," a student admitted.

"Maybe it's Catherine's unresolved longing," another suggested.

Students debated whether the ghost signifies supernatural presence or psychological haunting. The atmosphere in the room briefly mirrored the eerie tension of the novel.

Chapter 3 — pp. 23–25

16. Masculinity: Edgar vs Heathcliff

Dialog:

"Edgar is gentle but weak," one student noted.

"Heathcliff is powerful but destructive," another added.

This comparison helped the class examine two contrasting models of masculinity: one civilized but fragile, the other forceful but corrosive.

Chapters 10–11 — pp. 80–95

17. Hareton as the Innocent Victim

Dialog:

"Hareton relives Heathcliff's childhood abuse," a student said sadly.

"He becomes the mirror of Heathcliff's past," another replied.

Students identified Hareton as the novel's tragic emblem of inherited suffering, shaped by the very cruelty that once victimized Heathcliff.

Chapter 18 — pp. 152–155

18. Cathy Linton as Political Pawn

Dialog:

"Heathcliff uses Cathy as a tool," one student observed.

"Part of his economic strategy," another clarified.

The discussion traced how Cathy becomes instrumentalized in Heathcliff's plan to consolidate property and power, revealing patriarchal and class-based manipulation.

Chapters 27–28 — pp. 210–220

19. Hope in the Final Chapters

Dialog:

"Finally, something hopeful," a student said.

"Hareton and Cathy break the cycle," another added.

The class responded with relief as they encountered a rare moment of emotional reconciliation. The second generation's union symbolized healing after prolonged suffering.

Chapters 32–34 — pp. 245–260

20. Marxist Implications of Class and Desire

Dialog:

"This novel exposes how class destroys people," a student concluded.

"And how love cannot survive under inequality," another added.

Their final conversation tied together emotional, economic, and ideological themes, emphasizing how capitalism structures relationships and ultimately shapes the characters' fates.

Chapters 2–20

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that readers perceive social class as the central force shaping the characters' conflicts, choices, and identities in *Wuthering Heights*. This aligns with the Marxist concept that literature reflects material and class conditions. According to Marx (1867), class relations fundamentally determine individuals' opportunities, consciousness, and social behaviors. The students' observations—particularly regarding Heathcliff's early deprivation and later acquisition of property—illustrate this principle clearly.

Several readers highlighted Heathcliff's position as an oppressed lower-class figure whose access to education and social mobility was deliberately denied by Hindley. This reflects the idea that the ruling class controls material resources to maintain dominance. Engels (1884) emphasizes that social inequality is preserved through inherited property and access to institutions, a concept mirrored in Heathcliff's initial status in the Earnshaw household.

The findings also show that readers understood Heathcliff's rise to wealth as a symbolic inversion of class power. However, as students pointed out, he later reproduces the same system of oppression he once endured. This supports Eagleton's (2002) argument that capitalist structures shape individuals into perpetuating existing power hierarchies rather than dismantling them. The way Heathcliff oppresses Hareton mirrors the cyclical nature of class domination described by Eagleton.

Readers also identified Catherine's decision to marry Edgar as a class-conscious choice shaped by social expectations. According to Engels (1884), marriage within capitalist societies often functions as an economic arrangement rather than an emotional union. Catherine's remark that marrying Heathcliff would "degrade" her exemplifies the internalization of class ideology described by Althusser (1971), wherein individuals absorb ruling-class values as natural and necessary.

The contrast between *Wuthering Heights* and Thrushcross Grange noted by the students further supports Marxist readings of spatial class representation. Williams (1977) argues that physical settings in literature operate as cultural structures reflecting class experience. Readers described the Heights as harsh and chaotic and the Grange as refined and orderly, showing how Brontë uses space to materialize ideological divisions.

Generational class reproduction also appears strongly in the findings. Students recognized that Heathcliff denies Hareton education in the same way he was once denied, reflecting Althusser's (1971) concept of ideological state apparatuses that maintain class

structures across generations. In this way, the novel dramatizes the persistence of class inequality beyond individual lifetimes.

Furthermore, the intersection between gender and class in the readers' interpretations corresponds with Mitchell's (1971) and Walby's (1990) Marxist-feminist frameworks. Both theorists argue that class oppression cannot be separated from patriarchal structures. Students' responses about Catherine's limited choices and Isabella's victimization show that women in the novel experience layered oppression shaped by both class and gender.

Overall, the findings align strongly with Lukács' (1971) argument that realist characters are shaped not by personal psychology alone, but by the socio-economic totality that surrounds them. The students' interpretations confirm that *Wuthering Heights* represents social class not as an incidental background but as a determining structure that governs identity, conflict, and generational continuity. Therefore, the novel's representation of class is consistent with major Marxist theories, and readers' responses demonstrate an intuitive understanding of these structural dynamics.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how *Wuthering Heights* represents social class structures through a Marxist lens, drawing from twenty textual data points that reveal patterns of oppression, domination, resistance, and mobility. The findings demonstrate that Emily Brontë constructs a deeply stratified social world in which characters' identities, relationships, and conflicts are shaped—often constrained—by economic power and class position. Heathcliff, in particular, embodies what Marx describes as the subject of class antagonism, whose trajectory reflects both the destructive effects of class oppression and the destabilizing potential of class retaliation.

The dialogues and narrative moments analyzed in the findings highlight several dominant patterns. First, interactions between characters from different classes consistently reveal hierarchical power relations embedded in language, tone, and social expectations. These reflect what Marx (1848) identifies as the "persistent struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed," seen especially in the ways Hindley degrades Heathcliff or how Catherine negotiates between love and status. Second, the novel illustrates how class determines access to agency, education, property, and emotional expression—aligning with Eagleton's (1976) argument that literature often encodes class ideology within character behavior and narrative structure. Third, Brontë's depiction of social mobility, particularly Heathcliff's self-made rise to wealth, demonstrates the illusion of upward class movement, which Marx and Engels (1846) consider merely a reshuffling within the capitalist hierarchy rather than a true dissolution of class barriers.

In comparison with the three previous studies, which emphasized themes such as power imbalance, symbolic capital, and economic determinism, this research contributes a more granular, dialogue-based analysis that foregrounds *how* specific verbal exchanges reveal the mechanics of class domination. While earlier studies tended to generalize class conflict in the novel, this study offers a closer textual mapping of class expressions embedded in everyday interactions, thus enriching the scholarly conversation with more empirical, corpus-like evidence.

Overall, this study concludes that *Wuthering Heights* is not merely a Gothic romance but a profound literary exploration of class struggle. Through a Marxist perspective, Brontë's narrative exposes the tensions between inherited privilege and marginalized outsider status, illustrating how class shapes identity, desire, morality, and violence. The complexity of class representation in the novel reinforces Marxist claims about the pervasive influence of socio-economic structures on human relations. By

bringing together theoretical perspectives and textual findings, this study affirms that the novel remains a compelling site for examining social inequality and the enduring consequences of class conflict.

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