January 11, 2013

Dear Gr. 12 student,

Every time I give this assignment, I am challenged anew. When I was your age, I read mainly novels by great Russian or English writers. I was obsessed with the classics, determining that if I was to make something of my life, I would need to have a good grasp of what was considered essential reading in the English canon. My preferred authors were Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot and Jane Austen, incidentally, all female writers who had to work hard to be recognized and published. Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Solzhenitzhen rounded out the roster with a good dose of Russian stories. As time has passed, however, I have strayed far from the classics, falling in love with great Canadian writers like Carol Shields, Rohinton Mistry and David Adams Richards. My son has introduced me to contemporary science fiction, and I also enjoy reading about the exploits of people who live on the land, having recently made a move from an urban home to a rural one. When I asked you to read a classic novel, therefore, I was asking myself to tackle an old discipline at the same time.

This semester, rather than tackling a brand new writer, I decided to go back to a novel that I remembered being dark and difficult. Honestly, I don’t know if I ever finished the novel because I certainly did not anticipate the ending of the book. Both Charlotte and Emily Brontë, unmarried sisters, wrote novels that do not shed rosy light on humanity, but Emily’s gothic novel, Wuthering Heights is the darker and more devastating of the two.

The novel is essentially about a vicious love triangle that begets another in its wake. Catherine, the young and rebellious daughter of a nobleman, is almost instantly drawn to a homeless waif her compassionate father brings home. As the two grow up, they develop an inseparable friendship that turns to passionate love. Unfortunately for the young lad, whose name is Heathcliff, the tryst is impossible because of course he is entitled to nothing and Catherine cannot think of marrying a penniless man. Instead, she marries Edgar Linton, a soft spoken weak-willed man, who takes her away from her paternal home and Heathcliff. The separation only causes the passion to flare up even more violently, and ultimately Heathcliff does all he can to make life miserable for the Lintons, wooing Edgar’s younger sister to marry him and then abusing her; treating the son he has by her with contempt; and making Edgar and Catherine’s daughter miserable by forcing her to marry his whining weak child before he dies so that he can claim the inheritance. In short, this is not a happy story.

The story is told through the voice of the housekeeper Ellen, interestingly, another woman, who is a practical, but not always objective storyteller. The death of Catherine marks one of the most beautiful passages in the novel; Ellen remarks that after a tumultuous life, she lay in an “infinite calm. . .[and] a repose that neither earth no hell can break. [. . .]To be sure, one might have doubted , after the wayward and impatient existence she had led, whether she merited a haven of peace at last, but [. . .] her corpse asserted its own tranquility” (161). It reminded me of my mother’s own struggle with life, suffering constantly because of the disease that ravaged her body for twenty years, and the peace we all felt when at last she lay quiet and calm on her death bed. The description suggests that Catherine has made peace with her life and is now in a place of repose, and I hope the same for my mother.

One part of the novel I did not enjoy was the servant Joseph’s garbled speech. Described as “indistinctly muttering” to himself, his words became no clearer as the novel progressed. When he dismisses the visitor to Wuthering Heights with “Aw’ll hae noa hend wi’t,” I thought of Robbie Burns’ poems, so I suppose Joseph may be Scottish. Whatever the case, I tended to pass over his words quickly and I have to say I don’t think I missed much because of the edited reading.

I could also hardly believe the transformation at the end of the story, almost as though the author was tired of darkness and decided to end the book quickly and happily. There was such ongoing misery and cruelty throughout the book, I was compelled to read in the faint hope that there might be some resolution. I wondered if the man to whom Ellen was telling the story might come into play because she notices that he is taken with Cathy and suggests that he may be able to rescue her from her dire situation. I couldn’t think of another reason for including the otherwise insignificant man in the novel.

The novel made me glad that I live in the twenty-first century in a middle-class society where women and men have mostly equal rights. A woman’s lot in the early nineteenth century was not to be envied. The book mirrors a television series I am following, Downton Abbey where women are property to be bargained for. I can hear a woman’s voice in the plot, when the heroine of the story turns out to be Cathy, saving the day by being devoted to her selfish husband, softening a brutish young man, and generally being unwavering in goodness.

On a purely human level, Emily Brontë has delved deeply into the mind and actions of a completely self-absorbed man. Heathcliff shows not an ounce of care for anyone but himself. When the woman he claims to love marries another man, he cannot treat her with dignity but destroys everything around her. Recently, an acquaintance told me the terrifying story of his daughter’s ex-boyfriend, who came to their house with a gun, threatening to kill her family if she wouldn’t take him back. Apparently, time has not changed the dark manias and obsessions within the human soul. On the other hand, the novel is not without light, and the story shows what kindness and a little care can produce as well.

I would recommend the story to anyone who prefers dark tales and wants to be pulled forward in a plot that is full of twists and turns. Thanks to Wuthering Heights, I have been encouraged to look at some of the other novels I plowed through when I was seventeen and haven’t looked at since. Having weeded through the Delview library for classic novels, I have my eye on The Good Earth by Pearl S. Buck as well as Of Human Bondage by Somerset Maugham. They’ll take their places on the pile of books beside my bed, sharing space with Bill Bryson’s A Short History of Nearly Everything and Doris Lessing’s The Golden Notebook.

I’d love to hear what you’re planning to read next. Will you read another classic? Did you discover an author you might want to read more of? Or will you return to the fantasies and romances you are comfortable with? Whatever you decide, I hope the experience of reading a classic has been a rich one.

Happy reading,

Mrs. Unrau

P.S. If you come across a book you love, I’d like to hear about it!