

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

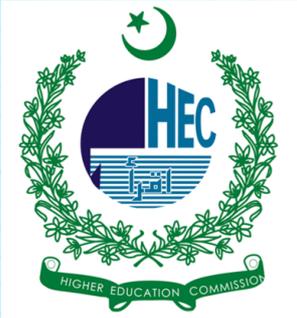
Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19023434>

**The Dichotomy of Roles: Nelly Dean's Significance in *Wuthering Heights*'
Power Relations**



Asma Neelam

MPhil English, Iqra University, Karachi

Email: asma.neelam786@gmail.com



Abstract

This paper explores the intricate power dynamics in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* through the lens of Nelly Dean, the novel's primary narrator. Far from being a passive observer, Nelly Dean plays a complex dual role as both participant and storyteller, navigating multiple positions of authority and subordination. The article argues that a dichotomy marks her role in the novel. While she appears subservient as a housekeeper, she simultaneously wields narrative and social control, shaping key events and readers' perceptions. By employing Michel Foucault's theory of power and discourse, this study examines how Nelly Dean mediates, manipulates, and maintains power relations among characters. Drawing on textual analysis and a critical literature review, the paper repositions Nelly as a pivotal figure whose layered subjectivity subverts traditional binaries of master/servant, active/passive, and truth/deceit.

Keywords: Power Discourse, Dichotomy, Narrator, Nelly, *Wuthering Heights*

Introduction

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) remains a staple of Victorian literature, renowned for its emotionally charged characters, Gothic sensibility, and structural complexity. Within this complex narrative, the character of Nelly Dean stands as a paradox. She is the central narrator, whose recounting of events shapes the novel's entire trajectory. Yet, she is also a domestic servant, seemingly marginal in the grand hierarchy of the household. This contradiction invites scrutiny.

What does it mean for a servant to hold narrative authority? How does Nelly's social position inform her storytelling, and vice versa? More importantly, how does her dual role influence the power dynamics between characters? These are the guiding questions of this study. While many have either dismissed Nelly as an unreliable narrator or vilified her for her biases, this paper argues that her narrative role is key to understanding the novel's complex power relations.

By combining close textual analysis with theoretical insights from Michel Foucault, this paper investigates how Nelly's dual role, both subservient and authoritative, complicates traditional readings of class, gender, and power in *Wuthering Heights*. It seeks to provide a more nuanced view of how power circulates within the domestic sphere, often in subtle and contradictory ways.

Background of the Study

Wuthering Heights unfolds within the confines of two estates, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, that serve as microcosms of Victorian society. While isolated geographically, these houses reflect the class stratification and patriarchal structures of 19th-century England. In such settings, the role of the domestic servant was clearly demarcated; servants were to be silent, loyal, and invisible custodians of their masters' lives.

Nelly Dean, however, subverts these expectations. As the housekeeper, she is omnipresent; as the narrator, she becomes omniscient. She moves between the two estates and witnesses the evolution of two generations of Earnshaws and Lintons. Her ability to narrate these events places her in a position of unique authority.

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

Furthermore, the narrative structure of *Wuthering Heights* is shaped by a double frame: Lockwood, an outsider, recounts what Nelly, an insider, tells him. This layering of perspectives adds to the novel's interpretive complexity. It also makes Nelly an indispensable filter through which the reader perceives the story. Her interpretations, omissions, and moral judgments form the lens through which all characters are viewed.

Understanding Nelly's background, her long-standing connection to both families, her moral compass shaped by Victorian ideals, and her limited social mobility is essential to unpacking the novel's power dynamics. She is simultaneously a product of her time and a figure who subtly resists it.

Theoretical Framework

Michel Foucault's theories of power, knowledge, and discourse provide a valuable framework for analysing Nelly Dean's significance. In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault argues that power is not merely repressive but also productive; it does not reside solely in institutions but is enacted through discourse, norms, and everyday practices. In Foucault's view, power is diffuse, relational, and omnipresent. This conceptualisation is crucial for understanding Nelly's role. As a servant, she seemingly lacks institutional authority. However, through her narrative voice and strategic behaviour, she becomes a producer and mediator of power. Her storytelling constructs knowledge about other characters, thereby shaping how power is perceived and distributed.

Foucault also emphasises that individuals are both vehicles and targets of power. This applies directly to Nelly, who both enforces and is subjected to societal norms. Her duality reflects what Foucault calls the "microphysics of power" (Foucault, 1980), in which power is enacted in intimate, everyday interactions rather than in grand political acts.

By applying Foucault's theories, this study frames Nelly as a character within a hierarchical structure and as a nodal point where multiple power relations intersect and unfold.

Literature Review

Critical reception of Nelly Dean has evolved over time. Early readings often dismissed her as a neutral narrator or a moral compass. James Hafley (1958) was one of the first to question this neutrality, pointing out her self-righteousness and the selective nature of her storytelling. Hafley suggests that Nelly is more involved in the novel's events than she admits.

Terry Eagleton (1995) offers a Marxist reading, positioning Nelly as a mouthpiece for middle-class morality. He argues that her narrative stabilises the main characters' chaotic passions, thereby reinforcing bourgeois values. In contrast, Gilbert & Gubar (2000) explore Nelly's gendered position, viewing her as a repressed woman who exerts power through narrative control.

Susan Meyer (1990) adds another layer by analysing Nelly's racialised descriptions of Heathcliff, revealing how her biases reflect broader Victorian anxieties. Meanwhile, Deborah Lutz (2011) focuses on Nelly's emotional influence and maternal role, suggesting that she wields a form of "affective power" that is no less potent than physical or institutional authority.

While these readings are insightful, few studies have explicitly connected Nelly's dual

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

role to Foucault's theories of power and discourse. This paper fills that gap by situating Nelly within the broader mechanics of power as articulated by Foucault, thereby offering a more integrated and theoretically grounded understanding of her significance.

The figure of Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights* has been the subject of sustained critical inquiry since the novel's publication. Critics have long been divided over whether she should be seen as a moral centre, a narrative manipulator, or a victim of social structures. A more nuanced understanding has emerged from a growing body of criticism that places Nelly within the broader frameworks of Victorian domestic ideology, narrative ethics, and class/gender politics.

One of the earliest significant commentaries on Nelly comes from Lord David Cecil (1935), who described her as a "sensible moralist" in a world dominated by irrational passion. This interpretation positions her as a force of stability and order. However, such a view has been challenged by later critics who emphasise her partiality and subjectivity.

James Hafley (1958) famously argued against the idea of Nelly as a neutral narrator, suggesting instead that she is a deeply flawed character whose interventions are often driven by personal bias and self-interest. Hafley contends that Nelly "conceals her actions behind a facade of moral uprightness," and is "complicit in the very tragedies she narrates" (p. 204).

Miller (1970), in his structuralist reading of *Wuthering Heights*, emphasised the novel's layered narrative voices. He suggested that Nelly's storytelling is shaped by an unconscious desire for control and coherence. For Miller, the narrative is "a palimpsest of voices," with Nelly's at the centre of a "web of interpretation" (Miller, 1970, p. 57).

In *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000), Nelly Dean is interpreted through a feminist lens as a repressed female figure who internalises patriarchal ideologies. Gilbert and Gubar argue that, while Nelly has limited agency, she expresses her frustrations through subtle manipulations and judgmental narration, particularly toward other women, such as Catherine Earnshaw.

Eagleton (2005) sees Nelly Dean as a representative of bourgeois morality in conflict with the Gothic energies of *Wuthering Heights*. He asserts that "Nelly's voice is the medium through which the wild passion of the Heights is domesticated into a moral fable," aligning her with the ideological project of Victorian realism (p. 119).

Recent empirical and interpretive research has approached Nelly Dean through interdisciplinary methodologies, incorporating sociological, psychoanalytic, and narratological insights.

In *Narrative and Ideology in Wuthering Heights*, Armstrong (2002) uses Foucauldian discourse theory to argue that Nelly operates within institutional frameworks that define her subjectivity. She contends that Nelly is "disciplined by the very ideologies she reproduces," functioning both as a caregiver and an agent of social normalisation (p. 198).

Meyer (1990) critically explores the racial undertones in Nelly's descriptions of Heathcliff, noting how her language participates in the racialised othering of the protagonist. Meyer suggests that Nelly's discourse not only constructs Heathcliff as morally suspect but also reflects contemporary Victorian anxieties about empire, race, and social mobility.

In her sociological reading, Elizabeth Langland (1989) posits that Nelly Dean

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

embodies the Victorian ideal of the domestic servant who ensures household order while remaining ideologically invisible. However, Langland emphasises that this invisibility is a fiction: “the housekeeper is the axis of domestic power, an enforcer of middle-class values who shapes the moral direction of the home” (p. 144).

Lutz (2011) builds on this by examining the erotic and psychological dimensions of Nelly’s relationships with the younger generation. She proposes that Nelly experiences “vicarious pleasures and symbolic maternal fulfilment” through her involvement in the lives of Cathy and Hareton, revealing a complex web of affective attachments and emotional power.

From a narratological perspective, Cohn (1999) situates Nelly Dean as a “homodiegetic narrator,” one who is part of the story they tell. Cohn argues that such narrators inherently disrupt the illusion of narrative objectivity, introducing ambiguity and reflexivity into the novel’s structure.

The question of narrative ethics, particularly the reliability of Nelly Dean, has also become central to contemporary criticism. Phelan & Rabinowitz (2012) argue that unreliable narrators such as Nelly generate a “rhetoric of distortion” that invites readers to engage in ethical evaluation. They note that Nelly’s partiality creates a “cognitive tension,” compelling readers to decipher the gap between her words and the novel’s broader truths.

Similarly, Anolik (2006) explores the psychological undercurrents of Nelly’s role, suggesting that her narration is a form of sublimated desire for recognition and control. Through acts of narration, Nelly transforms herself from a marginal figure into a central participant in the novel’s drama, effectively displacing others’ voices in the process.

The intersectional aspects of Nelly’s character are also foregrounded in recent feminist scholarship. Critics like Adrienne Rich (1979) have argued that women’s voices in literature are often “layered with internalised silencing.” In Nelly’s case, this silencing is complicated by her class position: as a working-class woman, she lacks both economic autonomy and discursive legitimacy.

In *The Servant’s Voice: Domestic Servants in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*, Straub (2010) emphasises the way servants in literature often function as narrative pivots, “bearing the burdens of knowledge while denied the privileges of speech” (p. 203). Straub identifies Nelly Dean as a key example, arguing that her function as narrator allows her to mediate between elite and subaltern experiences.

Postcolonial readings have also engaged with Nelly’s function as a gatekeeper of domestic ideology. As Homi Bhabha (1994) notes, the colonial household and by extension the British home was a microcosm of imperial power. Nelly’s regulation of behaviour, morality, and emotional expression echoes this domestic colonialism, wherein the boundaries of class and race are strictly policed.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, focusing on close textual analysis of *Wuthering Heights*. Passages involving Nelly Dean are examined for narrative style, moral commentary, and interpersonal interactions. The aim is to uncover the subtle mechanisms through which she exerts influence.

The analysis is framed by Foucault’s theory of power and discourse. Concepts such as the relational nature of power, the role of discourse in constructing knowledge, and the subject as both vehicle and target of power are used to interpret Nelly’s actions

and narration.

The study also contextualises its findings by engaging with existing literary criticism. By integrating theoretical and critical perspectives, the paper comprehensively examines Nelly Dean's complex role in the novel.

Textual and Content Analysis

The core argument of this research is that Nelly Dean, although she appears to be a servant, occupies a distinctive, contradictory position of influence in *Wuthering Heights*, both within the novel's narrative world and within its storytelling structure. By exploring her dialogue, moments of silence, narrative contributions, and interactions with other characters, we can gain a deeper insight into how she navigates and manipulates the social and emotional hierarchies around her. Nelly's voice not only mediates the reader's engagement with the story but also acts as a tool for moral and ideological control. This section presents a thorough close reading of her narrative contributions, examining how she exercises discursive and emotional power while preserving an appearance of submission and neutrality (Heizmann & Olsson, 2015).

Nelly's Narrative as a Mechanism of Control

From the beginning, Nelly positions her narrative as honest and responsible, associating herself with the principles of duty and impartiality. She informs Mr Lockwood, "I take no pride in my account... I followed his (Heathcliff's) orders" (Bronte, p. 32). This portrayal implies submission; however, it is quickly undermined by the extensive detail and interpretive depth of her story, which go beyond mere compliance. She selectively presents the tale of the Earnshaws and the Lintons, deciding which events to recount and which motives to emphasise.

Her portrayal of Heathcliff, for instance, is imbued with suspicion from the beginning. When Mr Earnshaw brings Heathcliff home, Nelly recalls:

"It's as dark almost as if it came from the devil" (p. 38).

"We crowded round, and over Miss Cathy's head I had a peep at a dirty, ragged, black-haired child... It spoke seldom, and generally in some strange gibberish that nobody could understand" (p. 39).

The terms "dark," "devil," and "strange gibberish" reflect Nelly's biases more than they reveal anything about Heathcliff's character. She contributes to his marginalisation by invoking differences in race, class, and language to reinforce his status as an outsider, thus aligning herself with the household's moral and racial standards. Through these language choices, Nelly exerts significant influence in shaping Heathcliff's role within the social hierarchy of *Wuthering Heights*.

Selective Storytelling and Emotional Manipulation

One of the most glaring examples of Nelly's narrative control is her manipulation of communication among the characters, particularly during Catherine's illness and in her relationships with Edgar and Heathcliff. In one moment, Nelly confesses:

"I refused to give him (Heathcliff) a letter which Catherine had entrusted to me to deliver" (p. 163).

"I had it in my pocket: he shall never know how much she has suffered" (p. 164).

The intentional suppression of emotional connection underscores Nelly's intent to manage not just the exchange of information but also the feelings and choices of those

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

around her. By behaving as an emotional gatekeeper, she successfully moderates both longing and sorrow, mirroring Foucault's claim that power operates through the production and dissemination of knowledge. (Foucault, 1980).

Moreover, when she describes her attempts to influence young Cathy's behaviour, she does so in moralising tones that conceal her deeper emotional investments:

"I exerted myself to prevent her going (to meet Linton Heathcliff); and I had succeeded, till this evening" (p. 224).

This effort at "prevention" ultimately proved ineffective due to Nelly's own contradictions and her struggle to establish strong boundaries. Although her actions are portrayed as protective, they often stem from a complex blend of jealousy, possessiveness, and concerns about social class.

Complicity and Silence in Patriarchal Violence

Nelly's passive responses to male violence are essential for understanding her relationship with patriarchal authority. When Hindley succumbs to alcoholism and begins to abuse Heathcliff, she provides commentary but shows little resistance.

"He drove him (Heathcliff) from their company to the servants, deprived him of the instructions of the curate, and insisted that he should labour out of doors instead" (p. 52).

"I was mortally afraid somebody might have betrayed me, and I had a presentiment that I should have a lecture from my master" (p. 53).

Nelly's fear of punishment and social backlash prevents her from taking action. Rather than intervene on behalf of Heathcliff, she opts for self-preservation, which reflects her internalization of patriarchal control. This demonstrates what Langland (1989) describes as the "strategic invisibility" of domestic servants; while they have the power to manage the household, they remain ultimately subordinate to its patriarchal authority.

Even more troubling is her response to Catherine's mental deterioration:

"I tried to smooth her pillow, and induce quiet sleep... But it was impossible" (p. 120).

"I ought to have given him (Heathcliff) a bit of Catherine's hair, but I hadn't the heart to refuse him entirely" (p. 125).

In these lines, Nelly shifts between caregiver and passive observer. While her actions may seem compassionate, they reveal an emotional detachment at crucial moments. She expresses sympathy, but her failure to act decisively suggests an unspoken support for the systems that contribute to Catherine's downfall (Booth, 1983).

Maternal Surrogacy and Ideological Conditioning

Nelly assumes a surrogate maternal role for many of the novel's younger characters. However, this caregiving role is filled with contradictions. Her maternal affection is often undermined by emotional manipulation and ideological enforcement (Armstrong, 1987).

When young Cathy expresses defiance, Nelly chastises her in overtly moral terms:

"You are a proud little minx... a scornful, headstrong creature!" (p. 180).

Such language reveals her role in reproducing Victorian norms of femininity and obedience. As Straub (2010) notes, domestic servants often functioned as enforcers of discipline, both emotional and social. Nelly's maternal behaviour, therefore, is not nurturing in a liberating sense but regulating and corrective.

Later, Nelly admits to misleading Cathy about Linton's condition in order to

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

manipulate her into compassion:

“I believed I believed he was dying... and I told Cathy, hoping to soften her” (p. 250). This emotional manipulation enhances her position as a subtle agent of control, influencing Cathy’s decisions while feigning empathy. Her close involvement in Cathy’s emotional growth illustrates how emotions can be weaponized within domestic environments to uphold power hierarchies (Hafley, 1958).

Narrative Framing and Moral Authority

Perhaps Nelly’s most enduring power lies in her control over the narrative itself. The entire story of *Wuthering Heights* is filtered through her voice, and even when Lockwood speaks, his impressions are guided by her storytelling. Her framing of events becomes moral commentary. For instance, when describing Isabella’s elopement with Heathcliff, Nelly exclaims:

“Isabella Linton was one who had the misfortune to be enthralled by a man whose adversities had hardened his heart... a fiend, a monster!” (p. 141).

This moral condemnation shapes the reader’s perception of Heathcliff while simultaneously absolving her of blame for Isabella’s downfall, despite her having allowed the relationship to progress without adequate warning.

This aspect of her narration aligns with Phelan & Rabinowitz’s (2012) concept of “narrative ethics,” in which narrators wield power not only through what they say but also through how they guide the reader’s moral interpretation. Nelly presents herself as righteous and reasonable, but her selective disclosures and manipulations reveal her active role in sustaining the very tragedies she recounts.

Conclusion

Nelly Dean’s role in *Wuthering Heights* is full of contradictions. As a servant, she is deeply rooted in the rigid hierarchies of Victorian society. However, through her narrative authority, moral judgments, and emotional influence, she becomes a significant figure in the novel’s power dynamics.

By applying Foucault’s theories, this study has demonstrated that power in *Wuthering Heights* does not reside solely with traditional authority figures but also with seemingly marginal figures who control discourse and emotion. Nelly embodies the Foucauldian subject who is both the bearer and target of power. Her dichotomous role challenges simplistic binaries and reveals the intricate ways power operates within the domestic sphere.

Far from being a neutral narrator or passive servant, Nelly Dean is a complex, strategic figure who shapes the narrative and influences the fate of those around her. Understanding her role not only enriches our reading of *Wuthering Heights* but also deepens our appreciation of how literature can explore the subtle workings of power.

References

- Armstrong, N. (1987). *Desire and domestic fiction: A political history of the novel*. Oxford University Press.
- Booth, W. C. (1983). *The rhetoric of fiction*. University of Chicago Press.
- Brontë, E. (2003). *Wuthering Heights* (D. Daiches, Ed.). Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1847)
- Eagleton, T. (1995). *Myths of power: A Marxist study of Wuthering Heights*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality: Volume 1: An introduction* (R. Hurley, Trans.). Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977* (C. Gordon, Ed.). Pantheon Books.
- Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. (2000). *The madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination* (2nd ed.). Yale University Press.
- Hafley, J. (1958). The villain in *Wuthering Heights*. *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 13(3), 199–215.
- Heizmann, H., & Olsson, M. R. (2015). Power matters: the importance of Foucault's power/knowledge as a conceptual lens in KM research and practice. *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 19(4), 756-769.
- Langland, E. (1989). *Nobody's angels: Middle-class women and domestic ideology in Victorian culture*. Cornell University Press.
- Lutz, D. (2011). The dangerous lover: Gothic villains, Byronism, and the nineteenth-century seduction narrative. *Studies in the Novel*, 43(3), 288–308.
- Meyer, S. (1990). Antislavery and national identity in Frances Trollope's *The life and adventures of Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. *ELH*, 57(3), 693–715.