“THE VILLAIN IN WUTHERING HEIGHTS”: 
AN ANALYSIS OF ELLEN DEAN’S NARRATIVE DISCOURSE

Abstract: Drawing on James Hafley’s 1958 piece of writing in which he argues for the perception of Ellen Dean as “one of the consummate villains in English literature”, the article sets out to investigate the facets of the character’s narrative discourse. Whether truth as she views it, or deliberate misdirection, the intradiegetic narrator’s presentation of her own actions and thoughts provide a multitude of interpretations, from “a specimen of true benevolence and homely fidelity” to “hidden enemy”. In the universe of the novel, the character provides the construction of reasonings to support, rationalize, or even to excuse her actions. These reasonings may be evidenced as the logical fallacies, or, alternately, as indicative of solipsistic plans. Consequently, the analysis showcases her autonarrative as a means of (re)constructing identity.

Key words: narratology, discourse analysis, identity

1. Introductory Remarks

While still holding the attention of critics 165 years later, Emily Brontë’s novel initially received overwhelmingly negative reviews, being perceived, among other supposed faults, as a clumsily contrived work. Since that time, however, the novel has received considerable praise for the “superb” conception “matched by a technique equally superb” (Allen, 1976: 197), with its “cunning interposition of intermediate narrators” (Daiches, 1979: 1066). To be more precise, the primary narrator, Mr. Lockwood, relates in his diary a secondary narrator’s account of the events. In its turn, Ellen Dean’s narrative is interspersed with confessions/soliloquies from most of the other characters, these tertiary accounts including Isabella’s most likely hyperbolic letter, and Zillah’s recounts. Consequently, the action of the novel, which had not yet been concluded at the time of Lockwood’s writing, is related by multiple narrators. One remarkable accomplishment of the novel, then, is the particularly complex and at the time innovative narrative perspective.

Moreover, the elaborate narrative structure supports the currently held perspective that Wuthering Heights is “the product of a mature artist who knows what effects she wished to achieve and possessed the ability to carry her scheme through to a logical and satisfying conclusion.” (Watson, 1970: 97)

2. Notes on the Character of Ellen Dean

When summing up the multiple perspectives on Ellen Dean, as expressed by the critics, we may note that a number of different aspects stand out. First of all, her character plays a twofold role in the novel: she is both narrative instance and acting...
character. In regard to her function, she is “at once narrator and chorus” (Allen, op. cit.: 198) and appears to be a plot necessity given that she is either present in all key moments, or acquires detailed information about them³. Secondly, our view of her as being essentially a spectator, or a mere observer like Lockwood, is contradicted by the actual events in the novel. These indicate clearly that, as critic James Hafley points out, Ellen Dean’s actions affect the other characters – we may point here to the role she plays in Catherine’s illness and its fatal consequences.

Within the universe of the novel, she has been described as a “simple peasant woman” (Allen, ibidem) of “inherent good nature” (Traversi, 1970: 266), which would lead to her being an “accurate and honest reporter” (Sherry, 1976: 131). However, her limited perspective of the events that constitute the plot of the novel makes her, of necessity, a “deceptive witness” (ibidem).

The conventional interpretation, to which Hafley objected, held that Ellen Dean is a common-sense woman with a preference for the normal and ordinary. It has also been noted that “at times her moral and emotional response to what is happening warns the reader not to accept her conclusions” (ibidem: 133), thus acknowledging that she is to be viewed as an unreliable narrator. However, Hafley built the case for another possible interpretation: motivated by her desire to secure a comfortable position for herself, Nelly is the actual villain in the novel, constantly making use of falsehoods in order to present herself in a better light. Having started out by being almost on a par with the Earnshaw children, she is motivated by the desire to maintain her status. She is thus cruel in the beginning to Heathcliff (cf. Hafley, 1958: 202), an action for which she offers no reason, merely noting – while not actually uttering the words – that she hated him: “Hindley hated him, and to say the truth I did the same” (Brontë, 2010: 39). Later in the novel, her feelings towards Cathy are presented to Lockwood (and to the reader) as “...she did turn out a haughty, headstrong creature! I own I did not like her, after infancy was past; and I vexed her frequently by trying to bring down her arrogance: she never took an aversion to me, though.” (ibidem: 70) As indicated by the emphatic form of the verb and by the punctuation, Ellen’s attitude is of firm disapproval, possibly even anger; the juxtaposition of Ellen’s admitted unpleasant behaviour with Cathy’s lack of rancour seems to present a more positive image of Cathy than of Ellen. Nevertheless, more than two instances of less than outstanding behaviour are necessary in order to form an opinion on her character.

Following Catherine’s marriage to Edgar Linton, Ellen becomes, by her own choice, an active participant in the events at Thrushcross Grange by lying to her mistress – “I was anxious to keep her in ignorance” (ibidem: 122) – and withholding significant information, such as Cathy’s actual condition of health – “I kept it to myself” (ibidem: 126) – and Isabella’s elopement – “I saw nothing for it, but to hold my tongue” (ibidem: 137). Ultimately, Ellen acts as a go-between for Heathcliff and Cathy, arranging a meeting that leads to Catherine’s final attack of her illness.

It is to be noted that the narrative technique employed by Emily Brontë “removes the author entirely from the scene” (ibidem: 129). Effecting this distance has both positive and negative consequences, one of the latter being the risk of remaining exposed to unlikely interpretations, or “absurdities”, as Wayne C. Booth considers

³ Indeed, Melvin R. Watson considers that “[c]ertain time-honored but slightly unnatural conventions [...] are used”; “to have Ellen Dean as a narrator, we must accept the fact that a servant can be in many places where she would not normally be and hear many things that she would not normally hear”. (Watson, op. cit.: 93).
Hafley’s radical view of Ellen Dean as foe and not friend (cf. Booth, 1983: 369). Similarly, another critic considers that “It would be wrong, however, to read too much sophistication, […] too subtle a method into the novel. There is no evidence that it was Emily Brontë’s intention to provide such an appeal to the intellect.” (Sherry, ibidem: 137) Nevertheless, the case can be made, even without reference to Umberto Eco’s *intention lectoris*, that the arguments presented by Hafley in what could be termed a radical interpretation stem from the text of the novel. We submit that the novel allows both interpretations, remaining ambiguous by virtue of its being a literary work.

3. Ellen Dean’s Narrative Discourse

Ellen Dean is relating a series of events, in other words she is performing the universal human action of telling a story. A particular of her narrative is that it has a dual audience, being formally directed at Lockwood and at the same time, but on an entirely different level, to the reader; whereas the characters in the novel speak directly to each other or to Ellen, in what falls mostly under the category of conventional human interaction, her recounting is designed as a story within the fictional universe of the novel – a deliberate action on her part, as the following quote attests: “I could have told Heathcliff’s history, all that you need hear, in half a dozen words.” (Brontë, op. cit.: 64)

Consequently, Ellen Dean holds the position of the story-teller, thus shaping the narrative universe by selecting, emphasising or possibly omitting certain events or details. Her role as narrator is marked at the level of the text by the framing. The beginning of her actual narration is preceded by Lockwood’s invitation and her acceptance of recounting Heathcliff’s history; the listener notes that “she commenced, waiting no further invitation to her story” (ibidem: 37), in what possibly indicates eagerness. Moreover, we are reminded of the intended recipient of the story by the narrator repeatedly addressing Lockwood directly, e.g. “We don’t in general take to foreigners here, Mr. Lockwood, unless they take to us first” (ibidem: 48), “But, Mr. Lockwood, I forget these tales cannot divert you” (ibidem: 64), or “Well, Mr. Lockwood, I argued and complained” (ibidem: 162). We note that she keeps her audience in mind at all times.

Within her narrative, we can identify a plain presentation of facts and events (accompanied by no commentary, even at times when it would provide further insight), as well as occasional explanations or justifications for her actions, e.g. “I should not have spoken so, if I had known her true condition, but I couldn’t get rid of the notion that she acted a part of her disorder.” (ibidem: 127) We may discern here a subtle hint at the end of her speech, which, while not being directly accusing, is enough to raise suspicion. It is therefore possible that Ellen is attempting to plant ideas in Lockwood (and possibly the reader’s) mind.

Furthermore, Ellen occasionally makes certain comments that jar with our traditional view of her as “healthy, placid, unstirred by strong emotions” (Sherry, op. cit.: 131); these comments are interpreted by Hafley as evidence of her duplicity: “‘She’s fainted, or dead,’ I thought: ‘so much the better. Far better that she should be dead, than lingering a burden and a misery-maker to all about her.’” (Brontë, op. cit.: 174-5). While the panic manifested beforehand by the character is a possible etc.

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4 An extreme example of which would be – in popular culture – the narrator in Agatha Christie’s classic detective novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd.*
explanation for the callous comment, it is equally possible to view the statement as characteristic of a cold, calculated person. Another relevant example is her unusual utterance, “But you’ll not want to hear my moralising, Mr. Lockwood; you’ll judge, as well as I can, all these things: at least, you’ll think you will, and that’s the same.” (ibidem: 197) The concluding part of this statement casts a suspicious light on her character.

4. Possible Interpretations of Ellen Dean’s Identity

Ellen Dean shows preferences and changes loyalties – actions that are congruous with human nature. She manifests a definite preference for Edgar Linton, as evinced by her use of the pronoun “us” and statements such as “my heart invariably cleaved to the master’s” (Brontë, op. cit.: 113), which lend credibility to the hypothesis that she harboured feelings of a romantic nature towards him.

Certain comments on her part, specifically those of the “I resolved to”, “I determined to” category, all containing verbs indicative of decision, emphasize her position as actant in the narrative and, at the same time, highlight a determination which seems to characterize her.

Moreover, the text provides us with smooth comments such as “I took the liberty of turning back to listen whether they would resume their quarrel together” (ibidem: 123) which raise the suspicion of a hidden duplicitous nature.

The opening paragraph of chapter XII, a description of the chaos at Thrushcross Grange on Catherine’s illness, ends with an image of Ellen Dean as the person taking charge: “I went about my household duties, convinced that the Grange had but one sensible soul in its walls, and that lodged in my body. […] I determined they should come about as they pleased for me” (ibidem: 126). This quote could be indicative of either her staid, down-to-earth nature, or of a belief of superiority on her part, or possibly even both. The spare narrative does not contain an indication of whether she believes herself to have been right; similarly, when recounting Cathy’s accusations of “Nelly is my hidden enemy” (ibidem: 135), Ellen does not comment on them, although, as Hafley emphasises, the manner of her recounting leads to the possibly – in Hafley’s view quite certainly – false belief that Cathy is delusional. However, we may refer to the following quote:

I seated myself in a chair, and rocked to and fro, passing harsh judgment on my many derelictions of duty; from which, it struck me then, all the misfortunes of my employers sprang. It was not the case, in reality, I am aware; but it was, in my imagination, that dismal night; and I thought Heathcliff himself less guilty than I. (ibidem: 291)

This is the key scene of Ellen describing her guilt, interpreted by Hafley as the author attempting to warn the reader of Ellen’s real nature. His explanation would require the character to knowingly lie, yet it is also possible that, faced with a depressing reality, her mind opts to disbelieve it.

As Ellen Dean is telling a story, she is giving voice to events and in doing so she presents to Lockwood and, indirectly, to the reader, a world of her creation, about which we may wonder whether it is consciously or unconsciously built.

In confirmation of Eco’s tripartite classification, the same discourse has received multiple and differing interpretations. Thus, in 1850 Charlotte Brontë wrote
about Ellen Dean as “a specimen of true benevolence and homely fidelity” (apud Hafley, op. cit.: 199); however, a more recent critic comments that “while Nelly’s comments are often sound, we frequently feel that, because she is conventional and limited, she cannot see the action in perspective” (Sherry, op. cit.: 129).

5. Conclusions

It may be noted that Ellen Dean’s narrative discourse contains, at the very least, half-truths, distortion of facts and concealments; moreover, an analysis of her narration should take into consideration its role within fictional universe, wherein Lockwood is the intended recipient.

Although, as critics point out, Hafley’s interpretation may appear forced, in particular on points such as the constant villainous intent, which would imply the character as a master planner since her adolescence, we believe and have tried to show that the text supports both theories: Ellen Dean as a figure with both positive and negative traits, and as a character with minimal capacity for caring and intent on furthering her position. Yet another possibility to be taken into account is that her feeling of guilt may be repressed and that she may have deluded herself into believing that the burden of responsibility does not lie with her.

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