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The Repressed Heart of the Narrative: Nelly Dean's Unconscious Desire and Jealousy in Wuthering Heights

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes a fresh look at Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights, using Sigmund Freud's ideas to explore the character of Nelly Dean. Most people see Nelly as a trustworthy storyteller and a moral guide in the novel. But what if her actions were driven by a hidden, unconscious desire for Heathcliff? This study argues just that. By looking at Freudian concepts like the unconscious, repression, and jealousy, I'll show how Nelly's small actions and things she didn't say like not stopping Catherine's famous speech or not telling Heathcliff the truth later on actually helped push the lovers apart. Because Nelly was about the same age as Heathcliff and didn't have many options for love herself, it's possible she developed a secret attraction to him, which made her feel hostile toward Catherine without even realizing it. I believe Nelly's whole story is shaped by these hidden feelings, which come out in passive-aggressive ways, like holding back information and staying emotionally distant. By putting Nelly's inner world front and center, this psychoanalytic reading shows her as a complex character whose unconscious desires mess with the main love story, changing how we see both her and the novel's tragic ending.

Keywords: Wuthering Heights, Nelly Dean, Unconscious Desire, Jealousy, Narrative Voice, Repression, Psychoanalytic Criticism.

INTRODUCTION

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is a classic, famous for its intense story of love, revenge, and obsession. Most of the attention has always been on the stormy relationship between Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff. But the person who tells us their story, Nelly Dean, is often overlooked. We tend to see her as just a reliable narrator, not as someone who was actively involved in the drama she describes. But Nelly was right there in the Earnshaw house, she controlled how the story was told, and she chose when to step in and when to stay quiet. This makes you wonder about her real motivations. Her passivity at key moments—like when she didn't interrupt Catherine's fateful confession about Edgar, or when she didn't clear things up for Heathcliff

later—makes you think she might not have been just a witness. Maybe, without even knowing it, she was one of the architects of the lovers' tragic fate.

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory gives us a great way to look at Nelly Dean's actions and her silences. Freud believed that our behavior is shaped by unconscious drives and desires that we often push down because of social rules or our own anxieties. These repressed feelings don't just disappear; they pop up in indirect ways, through slips of the tongue, things we forget, and actions that seem perfectly rational on the surface. Freud also talked a lot about jealousy and rivalry, and how they're connected to frustrated desires. Looking at Nelly through this lens, it seems like her storytelling might be colored by a repressed crush on Heathcliff. This attraction would have been even stronger because she was his age and, due to her social position, didn't have much hope for a romance of her own.

This paper argues that Nelly's unconscious jealousy of Catherine and her desire for Heathcliff are the real reasons behind her seemingly dutiful behavior. These hidden feelings motivated her to let their relationship fall apart, and maybe even to give it a little push. By uncovering the unconscious motivations that shape Nelly's story, I want to challenge her reputation as a neutral observer and show her as a psychologically complex character whose hidden feelings changed the course of the novel's central love story. By focusing on the mix of repression, desire, and jealousy in Nelly's mind, this psychoanalytic reading gives us a deeper understanding of her character and the tragic structure of *Wuthering Heights*.

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) has long been celebrated as one of the most enigmatic and emotionally intense novels in English literature. Scholars have approached it through a variety of lenses—romanticism, Gothic conventions, class struggle, and psychoanalytic readings. Yet, one of the most intriguing aspects of the novel lies not only in the destructive passion of Heathcliff and Catherine but also in the seemingly understated role of Nelly Dean, the housekeeper and principal narrator. Far from being a neutral observer, Nelly is deeply enmeshed in the narrative's emotional and psychological conflicts (Shunami, 1966).

Nelly Dean's narrative authority has often been taken at face value, with critics debating her reliability as a storyteller. However, recent scholarship suggests that her account is not a transparent window but a distorted mirror shaped by her unconscious desires, jealousies, and frustrations (Tytler, 2006). While Lockwood provides the outer frame of narration, it is Nelly's voice that guides the reader through the turbulent history of *Wuthering Heights* and Thrushcross Grange. Her role as a moral commentator is complicated by the traces of repression and projection embedded in her storytelling (Eagleton, 2005).

Psychoanalytic theory offers a useful entry point for exploring Nelly's repressed heart within the narrative. Freud's concept of repression and Lacan's notion of desire illuminate the contradictions in her narration. Nelly's language often betrays unconscious attachments—particularly toward the figures of Catherine Earnshaw, Heathcliff, and Edgar Linton (Lacan, 1977). Instead of functioning as a detached chronicler, she appears invested in shaping their fates, revealing jealousy, resentment, and a desire for control over their emotional worlds (Wright, 1998).

Nelly's depiction of Catherine is marked by ambivalence. On one hand, she positions herself as Catherine's confidante and caretaker; on the other, her commentary is laced with disapproval and subtle derision. Such moments suggest not only class resentment but also unconscious jealousy, as Catherine embodies a vitality and freedom that Nelly, as a servant, cannot fully

experience. By repressing her own unacknowledged longings, Nelly frames Catherine's passionate choices as destructive and morally flawed (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000).

Similarly, Nelly's portrayal of Heathcliff reflects both fascination and hostility. While she condemns his violence and obsessive attachment, her descriptions often linger on his presence in ways that exceed neutral observation. Critics have noted how Nelly both enables and obstructs Heathcliff's desires, reflecting her own conflicted attraction and repulsion (Irvine, 2005). This tension can be read as a projection of her repressed desire for influence and recognition within the social and emotional hierarchies of the households (Wright, 1998). Her treatment of Edgar Linton also reveals unconscious contradictions. Though she portrays him as gentle and civilized in contrast to Heathcliff's savagery, she simultaneously undermines his authority by emphasizing his fragility and weakness. Such duality may suggest an unconscious desire to diminish the privileged male figures of her world, leveling their authority with her own unacknowledged frustrations as a subordinate female voice (Michie, 2011).

The repressed emotional life of Nelly Dean destabilizes the boundary between narrator and character. She is not an impartial witness but a participant in the drama, whose unconscious desires seep into the very structure of the novel. By filtering the story through her voice, Brontë foregrounds the instability of narration itself, reminding readers that all stories are shaped by hidden motives, emotions, and jealousies (Homans, 1982). This perspective aligns with feminist and narratological critiques that emphasize the silenced voices of women in Victorian literature. Nelly, though outwardly confined to domestic service, exerts narrative authority over aristocratic figures, challenging social hierarchies in subtle ways. Yet this authority is compromised by repression, as her unconscious desires manifest in indirect, displaced forms rather than explicit acknowledgment (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000). By examining Nelly Dean's unconscious jealousy and repressed desire, readers gain a more nuanced understanding of *Wuthering Heights*. The novel becomes not only a tale of doomed love but also a study of narrative mediation, in which the storyteller's psychology shapes what is remembered, omitted, or distorted (Shunami, 1966; Tytler, 2006). Nelly's repressed heart reveals how jealousy and desire are not only thematic concerns of the characters but also structuring principles of the narrative voice itself. Ultimately, Nelly Dean's role demonstrates how the unconscious functions within literary texts—not as an external analytic imposition but as a dynamic force inscribed into the very fabric of narration. Brontë's novel, therefore, can be read as a drama of repressed desires extending beyond Heathcliff and Catherine to include the narrator herself. By bringing Nelly's unconscious jealousy into focus, this study contributes to ongoing debates about narrative reliability, psychological complexity, and the hidden structures of desire in Victorian fiction (Eagleton, 2005; Wright, 1998).

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Early Critical Approaches: Gothic Passion and Excess

When critics write about Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), they usually focus on the central lovers, Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff. These figures are often interpreted as the ultimate embodiments of Romantic passion and destructive obsession. Early scholarship tended to emphasize the novel's gothic excess and its portrayal of extreme emotions (Allott, 1958; Cecil, 1970). Within this framework, the novel was understood as a narrative of excessive passion and melodramatic intensity rather than subtle psychological or social dynamics.

Social and Class-Based Interpretations

Later criticism shifted toward examining the novel's engagement with Victorian society, particularly questions of class, inheritance, and property rights (Eagleton, 1975; Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). This reorientation reflected growing interest in how Brontë's novel interrogates structures of social mobility and power. Within these readings, Nelly Dean has generally been treated as a marginal figure—primarily the narrator whose moral commentary provides a counterpoint to the chaos of Catherine and Heathcliff's relationship. Influential interpretations by James Hafley (1958) and Dorothy Van Ghent (1953) cast Nelly as a source of order and stability, the moral backbone against which the destructive lovers are contrasted.

Narratological Concerns: Reliability and Authority

Even when her reliability as a narrator has been interrogated, as in John Sutherland's (1976) structural analysis, the focus has remained on her narrative function rather than her psychological motivations. More recent scholarship, however, has begun to challenge this limited understanding of Nelly's role. Critics now argue that she is not a passive narrator but an active participant whose judgments and interventions significantly affect the course of events. Beth Newman (1996) and Patsy Stoneman (2001) highlight the ways in which Nelly's storytelling is bound up with her class position, revealing how her anxieties about status and her ambitions for influence shape her narration. Similarly, Terry Eagleton (1995) and Sandra Gilbert (1984) note that Nelly's narrative authority offers her a subtle form of power in households where she occupies an ambiguous social position—not fully a servant, yet not a member of the family. Despite these insights, most analyses continue to sidestep her inner emotional life.

Psychoanalytic Readings of Catherine and Heathcliff

By contrast, psychoanalytic criticism has extensively analyzed the relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff. Their obsessive attachment has been read through Freudian and Lacanian frameworks, especially in terms of desire, repression, and the death drive (Heath, 1983; Shuttleworth, 1996). Juliet Mitchell (1984), for instance, interprets Catherine's divided love between Heathcliff and Edgar as symptomatic of unconscious conflict, while others have examined Heathcliff's vengeful drive as the displaced result of trauma and frustrated desire (Moglen, 1976; Kristeva, 1989). Yet Nelly is largely absent from such psychoanalytic accounts, often relegated to the role of external narrator rather than acknowledged as a character with her own unconscious desires.

Freud, Repression, and Jealousy

Freud's theories offer a particularly productive way to reframe Nelly's role. According to Freud (1900, 1915), unconscious wishes are often repressed but continue to shape behavior indirectly, manifesting through slips of the tongue, selective memory, rationalization, or displaced emotions. Freud (1922) also emphasized jealousy and rivalry as central expressions of frustrated sexual desire, often disguised under moral or dutiful behavior. Applying these insights to Nelly suggests that her seemingly rational and moral judgments may conceal deeper frustrations and jealousies. Her proximity to Heathcliff, combined with her ambiguous social position and lack of romantic prospects, could foster an unconscious attachment to him—one that finds indirect expression in her narrative decisions.

Feminist-Psychoanalytic Interventions

This perspective resonates with feminist-psychoanalytic criticism, which has long sought to uncover hidden female voices and suppressed desires in Victorian literature (Showalter, 1985; Rose, 1986). Reading Nelly in this way challenges the assumption of her neutrality and situates

her as a repressed yet emotionally charged figure within the novel. In short, while earlier criticism has illuminated Nelly's narrative unreliability and her fraught social position, it has largely overlooked the possibility of her unconscious romantic feelings for Heathcliff. This study seeks to address that gap by applying Freudian psychoanalysis to Nelly Dean, arguing that her repressed desires and jealousies play a crucial role in shaping the tragic trajectory of Catherine and Heathcliff's relationship.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the psychoanalytic tradition of literary criticism, specifically using Sigmund Freud's foundational theories of the unconscious, repression, and the dynamics of desire and jealousy. Freud suggests that the human mind has three parts—the id, ego, and superego—where unconscious drives (id) are constantly being suppressed by our internalized moral compass (superego) and managed by our conscious, rational mind (ego) (Freud, 1923). Because repressed sexual desires don't just go away but stay active in the unconscious, they often pop up indirectly in disguised forms—what Freud called the "return of the repressed" (Freud, 1915). These returns often show up as slips, omissions, rationalizations, and emotional displacements in our everyday behavior and speech.

Freud also stresses the importance of jealousy and rivalry as byproducts of frustrated desire. In his 1922 essay on jealousy, he argues that we often deny these emotions consciously, but they still shape our actions, leading to defense mechanisms like projection, displacement, and reaction formation. When love is unattainable or socially forbidden, desire might be sublimated or redirected, showing up as moral disapproval, hostility, or exaggerated care for symbolic substitutes. Applying these ideas to *Wuthering Heights* allows this study to interpret Nelly Dean's narrative behavior as more than just the result of her sense of duty or her class consciousness. Her selective interventions, moralistic tone, and uneven emotional responses to Catherine and Heathcliff can be read as symptoms of a repressed romantic desire for Heathcliff and jealousy of Catherine, which are displaced into acts of omission and later sublimated into maternal care for Hareton. This theoretical framework thus gives us the tools to uncover the unconscious psychological tensions that shape Nelly's narration and subtly redirect the novel's emotional structure.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a psychoanalytic literary approach based on Sigmund Freud's core theories of the unconscious, repression, and sexual desire. As a critical method, psychoanalysis assumes that literary texts—like dreams and Freudian slips—contain hidden unconscious drives and conflicts that show up indirectly through language, structure, and character behavior (Freud, 1900; 1915). When I use this framework, I'm not treating the characters like real people with their own minds, but as textual creations that represent and dramatize psychological processes. This allows me to read Nelly Dean's behavior, her tone, and the things she leaves out of her story not as simple reporting, but as symptoms of underlying emotional investments and psychological conflicts.

The method combines a close reading of key scenes with an analysis of Nelly's speech patterns, emotional tone, and selective interventions. I'll pay special attention to pivotal moments—Catherine's confession of her divided love, Nelly's concealment of Catherine's feelings from Heathcliff, and her different portrayals of the second-generation characters (Cathy Linton, Linton Heathcliff, and Hareton Earnshaw). I'll analyze these episodes for moments of repression (leaving things out, denial), displacement (transferring feelings), and jealousy (masked rivalry), as

theorized by Freud (1922) and developed in later psychoanalytic literary criticism (Mitchell, 1984; Rose, 1986).

This dual focus on the text itself and the unconscious motives behind it will show how Nelly's narrative voice is a site of psychological tension, shaped by her repressed desire for Heathcliff and her rivalry with Catherine. This methodology therefore combines psychoanalytic theory with narratology to show how hidden emotional economies structure the novel's events and how they are represented.

DATA ANALYSIS

Repression and Narrative Mediation in the Catherine–Heathcliff Tragedy

Nelly Dean's role in the central tragedy of *Wuthering Heights* isn't about big, obvious actions. It's about her strategic silences and subtle manipulations, which make a lot more sense when you look at them through Freud's theory of repression. Freud (1915) said that repressed sexual impulses, even though we're not consciously aware of them, still shape our behavior in indirect ways, often through things we don't do, excuses we make, or seemingly dutiful actions. Nelly's failure to step in when Catherine confesses her plan to marry Edgar for social status, even while admitting "I am Heathcliff," is a perfect example of this. Instead of interrupting Catherine's self-destructive logic or warning her about what could happen, Nelly just quietly leaves the room. Later, she lets Heathcliff overhear only the part of the conversation that will hurt him the most. This selective sharing is like what Freud called a "parapraxis"—a slip, not of the tongue, but of duty, that reveals an unconscious wish to separate Heathcliff from Catherine. Her later refusal to tell Heathcliff how Catherine really felt after he comes back just reinforces this idea. When Heathcliff is furious about Catherine's marriage, Nelly downplays Catherine's ongoing love for him, making it seem like she's perfectly happy with Edgar. Freud's idea of displacement—where repressed desire comes out as hostility toward a rival—helps explain this. Nelly's unconscious jealousy of Catherine as the object of Heathcliff's affection might be showing up as quiet sabotage, which helps her feel better by making sure they stay apart. Her tone when she talks about Catherine is often a bit preachy, painting her as vain, spoiled, and stubborn, while her descriptions of Heathcliff have a kind of restrained fascination that hints at a hidden admiration. These different emotional tones suggest a psychological conflict between a repressed crush and a sense of moral duty.

Jealousy, Rivalry, and Emotional Detachment

Freud (1922) saw jealousy as a result of frustrated love, something we often deny to ourselves but that still powerfully shapes our actions. Nelly's jealousy comes out in her subtle emotional distance from Catherine's suffering. Even when Catherine is dying, Nelly seems more worried about keeping the house in order than about Catherine's pain, describing her decline with a cold, clinical detachment. This coldness is a stark contrast to how caring she is toward Heathcliff when he's in distress. This difference suggests that Nelly unconsciously sides with Heathcliff while suppressing any compassion for the woman who is her rival. When you look at it through a Freudian lens, this emotional imbalance becomes evidence of a repressed sexual rivalry, not just a narrator trying to be impartial.

The Second Generation: Rechanneling Desire through Hareton

Nelly's treatment of the next generation gives us more clues about her repressed feelings for Heathcliff. She paints a negative picture of young Catherine (Cathy Linton) and Linton Heathcliff, highlighting Catherine's pride and Linton's weakness. But she shows a surprising warmth and

investment in Hareton Earnshaw's development. Hareton is a symbolic double of Heathcliff—he mirrors his rough beginnings, passionate nature, and initial lack of education. Nelly gives Hareton the kind of patient guidance she never gave Heathcliff himself. Freud's concept of displacement explains this pattern: Nelly's repressed affection for Heathcliff is sublimated into a motherly care for Hareton, a safe stand-in for the man she couldn't consciously desire. In contrast, her dismissive attitude toward Cathy and Linton can be seen as leftover hostility toward Catherine and the family line that replaced Heathcliff. Through Hareton, Nelly is able to "fix" the qualities she once helped to suppress in Heathcliff, allowing her unconscious attachment to finally find a way to be expressed.

Implications for Nelly's Narrative Reliability

All of this really complicates Nelly's status as a narrator. She's far from being a neutral observer. Her story is filtered through the emotional logic of repression: jealousy disguised as morality, desire displaced into care, and hostility hidden behind detachment. Freud reminds us that the unconscious leaves its mark not just in our actions, but in what we don't say, in the slips in our tone, and in the emotional coloring of our words. Nelly's narrative, then, is imprinted with a psychological drama that runs parallel to—and subtly changes—the novel's main tragedy. By unconsciously orchestrating Catherine and Heathcliff's separation while nurturing Hareton as Heathcliff's symbolic heir, Nelly writes her own unresolved desire into the generational story of *Wuthering Heights*, making herself a hidden but powerful force in its tragic design.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis shows three connected patterns in Nelly Dean's behavior and storytelling that support the idea that her actions are shaped by repressed desire and jealousy, as described by Freudian psychoanalytic theory.

Repression through Omission and Narrative Control

Nelly's consistent habit of leaving things out at crucial emotional moments is a perfect illustration of Freud's idea of repression as a form of avoidance that indirectly serves a repressed desire. Her withdrawal during Catherine's confession led Heathcliff to misunderstand her feelings, which set their separation in motion.

Jealousy Masked as Moral Superiority

Nelly's preachy tone toward Catherine, which contrasts with her restrained fascination with Heathcliff, fits with Freud's idea of jealousy as a byproduct of frustrated love, often hidden behind moral condemnation (what he called "reaction formation"). This undermines her image as a neutral narrator.

Displacement and Sublimation in the Second Generation

Her care for Hareton—Heathcliff's symbolic double—while looking down on young Catherine and Linton, shows the displacement and sublimation of her suppressed desire. Through Hareton, she is able to safely nurture the qualities she once helped to suppress in Heathcliff.

CONCLUSION

When we re-examine Nelly Dean through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis, we see that she's not the detached narrator she's always been assumed to be. Instead, she's a deeply conflicted person whose unconscious desires shape the tragic story of *Wuthering Heights*. Her calculated silences, the things she chooses to reveal, and her different emotional responses to Catherine and Heathcliff all point to a repressed romantic longing and jealousy. By letting Catherine's fateful speech go unchallenged, by keeping the truth from Heathcliff, and by framing Catherine

with a moralistic disapproval while showing a restrained fascination for Heathcliff, Nelly subtly engineers the lovers' separation. Freud's theories of repression, displacement, and unconscious desire help us understand these patterns, showing how seemingly rational behavior can be driven by hidden sexual currents.

This analysis also explains the strange way Nelly deals with the second generation. Her clear preference for Hareton—who embodies Heathcliff's passion and vitality—over the more refined Cathy and the weak Linton suggests that she's unconsciously redirecting her suppressed affection for Heathcliff. Through Hareton, she "rehabilitates" the qualities she once helped to suppress, making sure that Heathcliff's spirit lives on in a form she can nurture without crossing any lines. These dynamics make Nelly responsible not only for the emotional destruction of the first generation but also for the emotional healing of the second, positioning her as an invisible architect of the novel's cyclical structure.

By highlighting Nelly's repressed desire and its effects on her storytelling, this study challenges the long-held idea of her as a neutral go-between. It shows how unconscious drives can shape not only the characters' fates but also the very form and tone of the narration. More broadly, this reading of Nelly Dean encourages us to look for the hidden emotional economies that might be at work in other seemingly minor narrators in nineteenth-century fiction.

Research Implications

These findings show Nelly as a repressed individual whose hidden emotional world reshapes both the plot and the emotional tone of the novel. She is not a passive observer but a secret architect of the lovers' downfall and the cyclical restoration through Hareton, which shows how unconscious forces can distort the way a story is told.

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