

# Literary Criticism

## The 2018 Reading List

### EXPLORING IDENTITY:

#### THE EXPERIENTIAL IN THE FACE OF SELF-ORIENTED SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

"You've done just right to tell the story leisurely. That is the method I like, and you must finish in the same style."

"Got to admit they got spirit. Like this little old plant that ain't never had enough sunshine or nothing."

"But we by a love, so much refin'd, / That our selves know not what it is."

**Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*** turns on Nelly Dean's self-effacing—to what degree is she witting?—culpability, which she sums up, sharing with the story's narrator Mr. Lockwood, "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." Her immediate interlocutor in Brontë's nested narrative, Mr. Lockwood, might well be a naïf whose own self-assessment as a misanthrope, whose self-remove from civilization, and whose interest in the troubled history into which he stumbles, both in 1801 and again in 1802, renders him the consummate outsider whose wish to be away from people is maintained by Nelly's narrative, which, perhaps ironically, defines and chronicles the very aspects of human interaction that might send anyone into isolation, aspects that, nevertheless, whet Lockwood's—and the reader's—interest.

Ultimately and finally, not much about either Lockwood or Nelly Dean outside the crafted, cautioned credibility of Lockwood's manuscript is any more certain than is to be ascertained regarding the unplumbable Heathcliff. The recursive linearity of Dean's narrative is framed by Lockwood's own not-so-quick-to-understand encounter with the present in which Lockwood cannot seem to fathom the full context, whether it is the "[h]alf-a-dozen or so four-footed fiends" that awaken Lockwood to his new environs or the events that have ensured the "unquiet [kirkyard] slumbers" of the denizens of the Yorkshire moors from which he, alone (the reader included), emerges unscathed. The reader, who, thanks to Lockwood, Dean, and the sources on which they must rely, has secured absolutely no certainty regarding the interlocking stories—the metaphysical, sociological, geographical, psychological, familial, and meteorological vagueness, vagaries, and vicissitudes reigning: the only guaranteed certainty the internecine destruction, and the reader must, perforce Mr. Earnshaw's introducing the young Heathcliff into the relative stability of *Wuthering Heights*, anticipate a certitude in the midst of boundaries traversed and transgressed, a closure transcending the egoism, the passion, and the violence that thread the multi-generational Earnshaw-Linton-Heathcliff tapestry. Lockwood's failure to understand, to interpret, to actively discern leaves the reader unmoored, the anticipation unrewarded, unrelieved—Catherine and Hareton's New Year's potential notwithstanding.

Does Lockwood as narrator serve as foil? ("It is astonishing how sociable I feel myself compared with him.") Is Nelly's tale a confession? Has Mrs.(?) Dean engaged or can Mr. Lock-

wood engage another person in a personal, even connubial, relationship—the particular phenomenon to which their witnessings and reportings attest? Emily Brontë's narrative distancing confirms only the certainty not the reliability of Nelly's storytelling and Lockwood's recording, a "failing" that confirms Brontë's understanding that identity is necessarily a function of human-centered context, whether actually lived or re-lived through storytelling.

**Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*** is a determinately representative and painfully illustrative stop on the metaphorical railway that, even now in the twenty-first century, has, in view, no final terminus for those Americans who, like Hansberry's Youngers, are on a six (or greater)-generation search for the Penicillin of Independence. As mighty an endeavor as this on-going quest is, so is a self-contained reading, as New Criticism demands, of Hansberry's unremitting social criticism, her treatment of post-World War II society—not alone the African-American experience—as it reels against the background of promise unrealized. The playwright's own experience as well as those of her community as defined by class as well as by race emerge in every line of the play. The voices to whom she gives life are at once distinctive and representative. The telescopic and hyperbolic nature of drama-on-the-stage is manifest in the poignant precision of idea in the vernacular of Southside Chicago: the hopes, the dreams, the disappointments, the reconciliation in the face of the adversity brought on from within and from without.

The search for identity is not Bennie's alone, though it is her search (photography, guitar lessons, horse-riding lessons, acting lessons, African heritage, medical school) that serves as a lightning rod for familial self-criticism, indeed, as a distraction from the pulsating undercurrent of dreams unrealized purposefully symbolized in Walter's chauffeuring and in Travis's declared wish to become a bus driver: not until the hired movers (more than a symbolic inversion) arrive is there a chance that the family's determined climb out of subservience to circumstance is put in perspective. The play's several intertwined themes—generational differences, classism, civil rights, feminism, social justice—find expression in the politics of a family struggling against the odds.

**John Donne: selected poetry.** John Donne did not write for publication, though many of his early poems were shared in manuscript form among a small number of friends and patrons, and what he has left the world—in both poetry and prose—reflects a range of interest and a depth of wit. Even a careful sampling reveals his biographical transition, indeed a conversion, from the profane to the sacred—at all points Donne is at the center of self-reflection, vis-à-vis an object—in the Ovidian tradition—of desire or love or in meditative examination of his soul's relationship to God.

Comparison informs his treatment of both the physical and the metaphysical: the simile, the metaphor, and the conceit frequently establish the progress of thematic exploration. Synecdoche, metonymy, and irony complement his endeavor; his imagery finding support in paradox and pun; and while the tropes and figures define Donne's formal poetry and his melopoeia can delight, with meter he takes some license (Ben Jonson's inability to appreciate his metrical inconsistency is more than apparent in the indictment "Donne, for not keeping of accent [rhythm], deserved hanging."); however, the complementary nature of the rhythm's contribution-through-reinforcement of both image and theme and tone underscores Donne's mastery of poetic expression.

Donne's observation that no man is an island extends to history's recognizing his influence, both literary and cultural: we've come 'round to loving him more than "one whole day."