

Literary Lives: The Brontës

Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë are famous figures of English Literature: the three sisters, who spent a secluded childhood in rural Yorkshire, grew up to pen some of the most influential novels of the 19th century, including 'Wuthering Heights', 'Jane Eyre' and 'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall'. Their lives were often tinged with tragedy, yet they produced enduring works which have stood the test of time.



Haworth Parsonage

Early Lives

In 1820, a clergyman named Patrick Brontë arrived to take the post of rector at the parsonage in Haworth, West Yorkshire. He brought with him his wife Maria and their six children: Maria (born 1814), Elizabeth (born 1815), Charlotte

(born 1816), Patrick (known as Branwell, born 1817), Emily (born 1818) and Anne (born 1820). An ambitious clergyman, Patrick had already published some works of fiction and poetry. He had been born Patrick Brunty in Ireland in 1777, but changed his name to Brontë (because he believed it sounded more impressive) when he won a place at Cambridge University.

The Brontës had not been long established in the parsonage in Haworth when tragedy struck: Maria, Patrick's wife, died in 1821 of cancer. To help with the children, her unmarried sister, Elizabeth Branwell, moved up from Cornwall to live with the family.

'Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same.' ('Wuthering Heights' by Emily Brontë)

Schooling

As a clergyman, Patrick Brontë earned only a small wage and could not afford quality private schooling for all of his daughters. Instead, he elected to send the eldest four to a school



The Brontë sisters, painted by their brother, Branwell.

where they were taken on as 'charity children' in 1824. Cowan Bridge School was not a happy experience for the four girls: it is believed to be the inspiration for the miserable Lowood School in Charlotte's later novel 'Jane Eyre'. Among their experiences, the girls were forced to eat burnt porridge, wash in freezing bowls of water,



Charlotte Brontë.

and were humiliated by staff and other pupils. There were also constant illnesses and medical attention was not effective or kind.

In 1825, following a typhoid outbreak, Maria and Elizabeth contracted tuberculosis at the school and were sent home, but died within a week of each other. Charlotte and Emily, traumatised by the deaths of their sisters, were

subsequently removed from the school.

After this tragedy, the four remaining children, Charlotte, Branwell, Emily and Anne, remained at home and were educated by their father and visiting tutors. Patrick Brontë urged them to read voraciously, and, perhaps encouraged by their relatively lonely and isolated lifestyle, they began to create an imaginary world of their own, called Angria. The world was originally inspired by a set of toy soldiers given to Branwell by his father. The set sparked a wealth of imaginative stories and ideas, and the children even wrote tiny books for the soldiers. Later, when Charlotte left home for school again, Emily and Anne would create another imaginary world, titled Gondal, which was ruled by women.

Money remained tight for the family, and it became obvious that Charlotte, the eldest surviving daughter, would have to find a way to earn a living. She was sent to Miss Wooler's School in Mirfield in 1831 when she was 14. This time, school was a happy experience for Charlotte and she made some lifelong friends.

Three years later, Miss Wooler offered Charlotte a position at the school and it was decided

that part of her salary would be used to pay for Emily's education at the same institution. Emily, however, did not enjoy the experience as much as Charlotte and, after three months, she returned home to Haworth and her sister Anne took her place.

The Brontës in Numbers

2: number of copies the first edition of 'Poems' by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell sold.

6: number of children born to Maria and Patrick Brontë.

200: annual income, in pounds, of Patrick Brontë.

114,000: amount, in pounds, that a first edition of 'Wuthering Heights' fetched at auction in 2007.

34,023: number of copies of 'Wuthering Heights' sold in 2009, thanks to a mention in the 'Twilight' series of books.

The World of Work

Charlotte and Anne both became governesses, tutoring children in their homes for short periods of time. Charlotte then had an idea to start a school of their own, based at the Haworth parsonage, and decided that it would be useful to be able to teach modern foreign languages. As a consequence, she and Emily enrolled in a boarding school in Brussels for six months in 1842. On the death of their aunt, they returned to Haworth. Charlotte returned to Belgium in 1843, where she became infatuated with Constantin Heger, who ran the Brussels school. In the end, she resigned her post and returned to Haworth. She wrote some passionate letters to her unrequited love from England, but never received a reply.

'Reading is my favourite occupation, when I have leisure for it and books to read.'
(**'Agnes Grey'** by Anne Brontë)

Meanwhile, back at home, Branwell had tried to pursue a career as a painter in Bradford, but ended up returning to the parsonage in debt. A couple of other jobs had also ended badly, and it is believed he had an affair with his

employer's wife. Anne had secured another post as a governess, but she decided to leave the role and return home in 1845.



Emily Brontë

The return of the siblings coincided with the decline of their father, whose eyesight had been badly affected by cataracts. Charlotte devoted herself to nursing him after an operation on his eyes, and during this time she began writing in earnest. The plan to start up a school of their own never came to fruition; it proved unpopular

and unable to attract pupils.

Publishing Success and Secret Identities

In 1846, Charlotte, Emily and Anne used some money left by their recently deceased aunt to publish a volume of their poetry. Titled simply 'Poems', it was published under the pseudonyms Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell in the hope that these names would not reveal that they were women. The volume sold only two copies.

Charlotte decided to next write a novel, titled 'The Professor', which she sent to publishers and which was rejected (although it would be published after her death). Her next novel, however, titled 'Jane Eyre', was immediately accepted and published in 1847, again under the pseudonym Currer Bell. It was a great success and well-received by the public. The story of a woman, employed as a governess, who falls in love with her employer and then discovers a dark secret about him, it drew heavily on Charlotte's life experiences.

'I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will.' (**'Jane Eyre'** by Charlotte Brontë)

Meanwhile, Emily had written 'Wuthering Heights', the story of a passionate relationship which spans three generations on the Yorkshire Moors, which was also published in 1847, also under her pseudonym, Ellis Bell. This novel, however, was less well received – some critics were outraged by the dark and brooding tone of the work. Despite the mixed reception, however, it sold well.

'Wuthering Heights' was first published as part of a two-volume set with Anne's first novel, 'Agnes Grey'. She also used her pseudonym, Acton Bell. The novel is about a governess who works for various families and eventually falls in love and marries. Although not as celebrated as the works of her sisters, it was nevertheless well received by the public.

'I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself.' ('Jane Eyre' by Charlotte Brontë)

The success of all three novels fuelled speculation about the authors, with some claiming the books were all written by one man. Eventually,

the sisters were compelled to reveal their true identities, shortly after Anne published her second novel in 1848, 'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall'.

Tragedy Strikes Again

While the sisters were enjoying their publishing success, Branwell's life was deteriorating. His failure at so many jobs had made him depressed, and he had become increasingly dependent on alcohol and drugs. He was plagued by nightmares and his behaviour became erratic. He finally succumbed to tuberculosis in September 1848, aged 31. His death was a huge shock to the sisters.

Sadly, the tragic events were not over. After attending her brother's funeral, Emily never left the house again and she, too, died of tuberculosis just three months later, aged 30. Then, it became clear that Anne was also extremely ill. Charlotte nursed her sister carefully but Anne died during a trip to Scarborough, aged 29.

Devastated by the deaths of her siblings, Charlotte returned to writing and published 'Shirley' in 1849. She had become a literary celebrity, and met many well-known and influential people, including the novelists William Thackeray and Elizabeth Gaskell. She

published her final novel, 'Villette', in 1853

'There is always a 'but' in this imperfect world' ('The Tenant of Wildfell Hall' by Anne Brontë)

Brief Happiness

The curate to her father in Haworth, Arthur Bell Nichols, fell in love with Charlotte and proposed to her. Although she initially rejected his advances, she changed her mind and the two were married in 1854. However, this happiness was short-lived: Charlotte died, aged 39, in 1855. The cause of death is uncertain; it could have been tuberculosis, but may also have been Hyperemesis Gravidarum – otherwise known as excessive morning sickness – given that Charlotte was pregnant.

Patrick Brontë outlived all his children. He finally died in 1861, aged 84.