

## CHARLOTTE BRONTE AND HER CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS ENGLISH LITERATURE

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### **Abstract**

Charlotte Bronte was one of the eminent novelists and poet in the Victorian age, the eldest of the three Bronte sisters who survived into adulthood, whose novels are English literature standards. The present study is an effort to highlight her major contribution in the field of English literature. A writer all her life, Bronte published her first novel, Jane Eyre, in 1847 under the manly pseudonym Currer Bell. Though controversial in its criticism of society's treatment of impoverished women, the book was an immediate hit. She followed the success with Shirley in 1848 and Vilette in 1853. ). Bronte's decision to abandon poetry for novel writing exemplifies the dramatic shift in literary tastes and the marketability of literary genres-from poetry to prose fiction-that occurred in the 1830s and 1840s. Her experience as a poet thus reflects the dominant trends in early Victorian literary culture and demonstrates her centrality to the history of nineteenth-century literature

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## Charlotte Bronte: An Introduction

Writer Charlotte Bronte was born on April 21, 1816, in Thornton, Yorkshire, England. Said to be the most dominant and ambitious of the Brontes, Charlotte was raised in a strict Anglican home by her clergyman father and a religious aunt after her mother and two eldest siblings died. She and her sister Emily attended the Clergy Daughter's School at Cowan Bridge, but were largely educated at home. Though she tried to earn a living as both a governess and a teacher, Bronte missed her sisters and eventually returned home.

In 1824 the four eldest Bronte daughters were enrolled as pupils at the Clergy Daughter's School at Cowan Bridge. The following year Maria and Elizabeth, the two eldest daughters, became ill, left the school and died: Charlotte and Emily, understandably, were brought home.

In 1826 Mr. Bronte brought home a box of wooden soldiers for Branwell to play with. Charlotte, Emily, Branwell, and Ann, playing with the soldiers, conceived of and began to write in great detail about an imaginary world which they called Angria. In 1831 Charlotte became a pupil at the school at Roe Head, but she left school the following year to teach her sisters at home. She returned to Roe Head School in 1835 as a governess: for a time her sister Emily attended the same school as a pupil, but became homesick and returned to Haworth. Ann took her place from 1836 to 1837.

In 1838, Charlotte left Roe Head School. In 1839 she accepted a position as governess in the Sidgwick family, but left after three months and returned to Haworth. In 1841 she became governess in the White family, but left, once again, after nine months. Upon her return to Haworth the three sisters, led by Charlotte, decided to open their own school after the necessary preparations had been completed. In 1842 Charlotte and Emily went to Brussels to complete their studies. After a trip home to Haworth, Charlotte returned alone to Brussels, where she remained until 1844.

Upon her return home the sisters embarked upon their project for founding a school, which proved to be an abject failure: their advertisements did not elicit a single response from the public. The following year Charlotte discovered Emily's poems, and decided to publish a selection of the

poems of all three sisters: 1846 brought the publication of their Poems, written under the pseudonyms of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. Charlotte also completed *The Professor*, which was rejected for publication. The following year, however, Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, and Ann's *Agnes Grey* were all published, still under the Bell pseudonyms. In 1848 Charlotte and Ann visited their publishers in London, and revealed the true identities of the "Bells." In the same year Branwell Bronte, by now an alcoholic and a drug addict, died, and Emily died shortly thereafter. Ann died the following year. In 1849 Charlotte, visiting London, began to move in literary circles, making the acquaintance, for example, of Thackeray.

In 1850 Charlotte edited her sister's various works, and met Mrs. Gaskell. In 1851 she visited the Great Exhibition in London, and attended a series of lectures given by Thackeray. The Rev. A. B. Nicholls, curate of Haworth since 1845, proposed marriage to Charlotte in 1852. The Rev. Mr. Bronte objected violently, and Charlotte, who, though she may have pitied him, was in any case not in love with him, refused him. Nicholls left Haworth in the following year, the same in which Charlotte's *Villette* was published. By 1854, however, Mr. Bronte's opposition to the proposed marriage had weakened, and Charlotte and Nicholls became engaged. Nicholls returned as curate at Haworth, and they were married, though it seems clear that Charlotte, though she admired him, still did not love him. In 1854 Charlotte, expecting a child, caught pneumonia.

### **Early life and Education**

Charlotte was born in Thornton, Yorkshire in 1816, the third of six children, to Maria (née Branwell) and her husband Patrick Bronte (formerly surnamed Brunty or Prunty), an Irish Anglican clergyman. In 1820, the family moved a few miles to the village of Haworth, where Patrick had been appointed Perpetual Curate of St Michael and All Angels Church. Charlotte's mother died of cancer on 15 September 1821, leaving five daughters and a son to be taken care of by her sister Elizabeth Branwell.

In August 1824, Charlotte was sent with three of her sisters, Emily, Maria, and Elizabeth, to the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge in Lancashire (Charlotte later used the school as the basis for the fictional Lowood School in *Jane Eyre*). The school's poor conditions, Charlotte

maintained, permanently affected her health and physical development and hastened the deaths of her two elder sisters, Maria (born 1814) and Elizabeth (born 1815), who died of tuberculosis in June 1825. Soon after their father removed them from the school. At home in Haworth Parsonage Charlotte acted as "the motherly friend and guardian of her younger sisters". She and the other surviving children — Branwell, Emily, and Anne – created their own literary fictional worlds, and began chronicling the lives and struggles of the inhabitants of these imaginary kingdoms. Charlotte and Branwell wrote Byronic stories about their imagined country ("Angria") and Emily and Anne wrote articles and poems about theirs ("Gondal"). The sagas which they created were elaborate and convoluted (and still exist in partial manuscripts) and provided them with an obsessive interest during childhood and early adolescence, which prepared them for their literary vocations in adulthood. Charlotte continued her education at Roe Head, Mirfield, from 1831 to 32, where she met her lifelong friends and correspondents, Ellen Nussey and Mary Taylor. During this period, she wrote her novella *The Green Dwarf* (1833) under the name of Wellesley. Charlotte returned to Roe Head as a teacher from 1835 to 1838. In 1839, she took up the first of many positions as governess to various families in Yorkshire, a career she pursued until 1841. Politically a Tory, she preached tolerance rather than revolution. She held high moral principles, and, despite her shyness in company, she was always prepared to argue her beliefs.

### Brussels

In 1842 Charlotte and Emily travelled to Brussels to enroll in a boarding school run by Constantin Heger (1809–96) and his wife Claire Zoé Parent Heger (1804–87). In return for board and tuition, Charlotte taught English and Emily taught music. Their time at the boarding school was cut short when Elizabeth Branwell, their aunt who joined the family after the death of their mother to look after the children, died of internal obstruction in October 1842. Charlotte returned alone to Brussels in January 1843 to take up a teaching post at the boarding school. Her second stay at the boarding school was not a happy one; she became lonely, homesick and deeply attached to Constantin Heger. She finally returned to Haworth in January 1844 and later used her time at the boarding school as the inspiration for some experiences in *The Professor* and *Villette*.

**First publication**

Although the early poems contain visionary, lyre-playing bards and other romantic poet-figures, Bronte in her stories and plays repeatedly satirizes the romantic conception of the poet as a self-inspired original genius. She deploys parodic characters, such as Henry Rhymer in "The Poetaster," a story dated 6-12 July 1830, to debunk her own romantic posturing and that of her siblings. "The Poetaster" also humorously depicts the changing literary culture of England in the 1830s, a time when technological advances in printing allowed for the entry of many new writers into the literary marketplace. The "noble profession [of authorship] is dishonoured," wails a Glass Town publisher who soon expects to see "every child that walks along the streets, bearing its manuscripts in its hand, going to the printers for publication." Making fun of her own and her siblings' precocious literary aspirations, Bronteshows a good-humored awareness of both the opportunities and the complexities involved in pursuing a literary career in her day.

In May 1846, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne self-financed the publication of a joint collection of poetry under the assumed names of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. These pseudonyms deliberately veiled the sisters' gender whilst preserving their real initials, thus Charlotte was "Currer Bell". "Bell" was also the middle name of Haworth's curate, Arthur Bell Nicholls, whom Charlotte would later marry. Of the decision to use nom de plumes, Charlotte later wrote:

*“Averse to personal publicity, we veiled our own names under those of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell; the ambiguous choice being dictated by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because — without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called 'feminine' — we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery, which is not true praise”.*

Although only two copies of the collection of poetry were sold, the sisters continued writing for publication and began their first novels, continuing to use their nom de plumes when sending manuscripts to potential publishers.

## Jane Eyre

Jane Eyre drew the attention of London literary society and from within critics' circles because of its unconventionality, and distinctiveness from the mainstream of contemporary fiction. Many reviews about the sensation that Jane Eyre had created appeared in various magazines and journals. The wellknown Victorian critic of literature George Henry Lews said in the Westminster Review that Jane Eyre was "the best novel of the season" with "the originality and freshness of its style" (as cited in Barker, 2002, p.170). An anonymous reviewer in Christian Remembrancer praised it, writing "no novel has created so much sensation as Jane Eyre" with "the remarkable power" that it displayed. This reviewer also found "masculine power, breadth and shrewdness" throughout Jane Eyre (as cited in O'Neill, 1968, p.14).

However, there were not just enthusiastic comments voiced about Jane Eyre in the early reviews. The reviewers also pointed out the defects in Jane Eyre such as the "improbability" and the "coarseness" (as cited in Newman, 1996, p.446). For example, although Lews highly praised Jane Eyre's unconventionality, he felt the scenes of Jane's lonely wanderings in the moors and the dangerous mad wife Bertha Mason, secretly confined to the attic, were improbable. The above said anonymous reviewer for the Christian Remembrancer also said of the novel that "the plot is most extravagantly improbable, verging all along upon the supernatural" (as cited in O'Neill, 1968, p.14). By "supernatural" this reviewer is referring to the scene of the mysterious unseen summons that hastened Jane back to Rochester when she was being besieged by St. John's overwhelming proposal (Newman, 1996, p.446). The "coarseness" that the early critics described applied not only to the language that the author used which seemed "ungenteel" to some contemporaries, with its provincialisms and the use of slang, but also the unconventional direct and bold conversations between Jane and Rochester, which seemed scandalous and even immoral to Charlotte Brontë's contemporaries (Newman, 1996, p.447). For example, Jane and Rochester overtly expressed their love and passions for each other; Rochester confessed to Jane his previous love affairs

## Shirley and family bereavements

Following the success of Jane Eyre, Charlotte began work in 1848 on the manuscript of what

was to become her second novel, *Shirley*. However the manuscript was only partially completed when the Brontë household suffered a tragic turn of events, experiencing the deaths of three family members within a period of only eight months. In September 1848 Charlotte's brother, Branwell, the only son of the family, died of chronic bronchitis and marasmus exacerbated by heavy drinking, although Charlotte believed his death was due to tuberculosis. Branwell was also a suspected "opium eater", (i.e. a laudanum addict). Emily became seriously ill shortly after Branwell's funeral, dying of pulmonary tuberculosis in December 1848. Anne died of the same disease in May 1849. Charlotte was unable to continue writing during this period.

After Anne's death Charlotte resumed writing as a way of dealing with her grief, and *Shirley* was published in October 1849. *Shirley* deals with the themes of industrial unrest and the role of women in society. Unlike *Jane Eyre*, which is written from the first-person perspective of the main character, *Shirley* is written from the third-person perspective of a narrator. It consequently lacks the emotional immediacy of *Jane Eyre*, and reviewers found it less shocking.

### **In society**

In view of the success of her novels, particularly *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte was persuaded by her publisher to visit London occasionally, where she revealed her true identity and began to move in a more exalted social circle, becoming friends with Harriet Martineau and Elizabeth Gaskell, and acquainted with William Makepeace Thackeray and G. H. Lewes. However Charlotte never left Haworth for more than a few weeks at a time as she did not want to leave her ageing father's side. Thackeray's daughter, the writer Anne Isabella Thackeray Ritchie recalled a visit to her father by Charlotte:

...two gentlemen come in, leading a tiny, delicate, serious, little lady, with fair straight hair, and steady eyes. She may be a little over thirty; she is dressed in a little barège dress with a pattern of faint green moss. She enters in mittens, in silence, in seriousness; our hearts are beating with wild excitement. This then is the authoress, the unknown power whose books have set all London talking, reading, speculating; some people even say our father wrote the books – the wonderful books... The moment is so breathless that dinner comes as a relief to the solemnity of the occasion,

and we all smile as my father stoops to offer his arm; for, genius though she may be, Miss Brontecan barely reach his elbow. My own personal impressions are that she is somewhat grave and stern, specially to forward little girls who wish to chatter... Every one waited for the brilliant conversation which never began at all. Miss Bronteretired to the sofa in the study, and murmured a low word now and then to our kind governess... the conversation grew dimmer and more dim, the ladies sat round still expectant, my father was too much perturbed by the gloom and the silence to be able to cope with it at all... after Miss Brontehad left, I was surprised to see my father opening the front door with his hat on. He put his fingers to his lips, walked out into the darkness, and shut the door quietly behind him... long afterwards... Mrs. Procter asked me if I knew what had happened... It was one of the dullest evenings [Mrs Procter] had ever spent in her life... the ladies who had all come expecting so much delightful conversation, and the gloom and the constraint, and how finally, overwhelmed by the situation, my father had quietly left the room, left the house, and gone off to his club.

### **Friendship with Elizabeth Gaskell**

Charlotte sent copies of Shirley to selected leading authors of the day, including Elizabeth Gaskell. Gaskell and Charlotte subsequently met in August 1850 and began a friendship which, whilst not necessarily close, was significant in that Gaskell would write a biography of Charlotte after Charlotte's death in 1855. The biography, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, was published in 1857 and was unusual at the time in that, rather than analysing its subject's achievements, it instead concentrated on the private details of Charlotte's life, in particular placing emphasis on aspects which countered the accusations of 'coarseness' which had been levelled at Charlotte's writing. Though frank in places, Gaskell was selective about which details she revealed; for example, she suppressed details of Charlotte's love for Heger, a married man, as being too much of an affront to contemporary morals and as a possible source of distress to Charlotte's still-living friends, father and husband. Gaskell also provided doubtful and inaccurate information about Patrick Brontë, claiming, for example, that he did not allow his children to eat meat. This is refuted by one of Emily Brontë's diary papers, in which she describes the preparation of meat and potatoes for dinner



at the parsonage, as Juliet Barker points out in her recent biography, *The Brontës*. It has been argued that the particular approach of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* transferred the focus of attention away from the 'difficult' novels of not just Charlotte but all the Brontë sisters, and began a process of sanctification of their private lives.

### **Villette**

Charlotte's third published novel (and her last to be published during her lifetime) was *Villette*, which came out in 1853. The main themes of *Villette* include isolation, and how such a condition can be borne, and the internal conflict brought about by societal repression of individual desire. The book's main character, Lucy Snowe, travels abroad to teach in a boarding school in the fictional town of Villette, where she encounters a culture and religion different to her own, and where she falls in love with a man ('Paul Emanuel') whom she cannot marry due to societal forces. Her experiences result in her having a breakdown, but eventually she achieves independence and fulfilment in running her own school. *Villette* marked Charlotte's return to the format of writing from a first-person perspective (that of Lucy Snowe), a technique which she had used so successfully in *Jane Eyre*. Also similar to *Jane Eyre* was Charlotte's use of aspects from her own life history as inspiration for fictional events in the novel, in particular her reworking of her own time spent at the pensionnat in Brussels into Lucy spending time teaching at the boarding school, and her own falling in love with Constantin Heger into Lucy falling in love with 'Paul Emanuel'. *Villette* was acknowledged by the critics of the day as being a potent and sophisticated piece of writing, although it was still criticised for its 'coarseness' and for not being suitably 'feminine' in its portrayal of Lucy's desires.

### **Illness and subsequent death**

In June 1854, Charlotte married Arthur Bell Nicholls, her father's curate and, in the opinion of many scholars, the model for several of her literary characters such as *Jane Eyre*'s Rochester and St. John. She became pregnant soon after the marriage. Her health declined rapidly during this time, and according to Gaskell, her earliest biographer, she was attacked by "sensations of perpetual nausea and ever-recurring faintness." Charlotte died, along with her unborn child, on 31

March 1855, at the young age of 38. Her death certificate gives the cause of death as phthisis (tuberculosis), but many biographers[who?] suggest she may have died from dehydration and malnourishment, caused by excessive vomiting from severe morning sickness or hyperemesis gravidarum. There is also evidence to suggest that Charlotte died from typhus she may have caught from Tabitha Ackroyd, the Bronte household's oldest servant, who died shortly before her. Charlotte was interred in the family vault in The Church of St. Michael and All Angels, Haworth, West Yorkshire, England.

Posthumously, her first-written novel was published in 1857, the fragment she worked on in her last years in 1860 (twice completed by recent authors, the more famous version being *Emma Brown: A Novel from the Unfinished Manuscript* by Charlotte Bronte by Clare Boylan, 2003), and much *Angria* material over the ensuing decades

### Conclusion

Although Charlotte Bronte was one of the most famous Victorian women writers, only two of her poems are widely read today, and these are not her best or most interesting poems. Like her contemporary Elizabeth Barrett Browning, she experimented with the poetic forms that became the characteristic modes of the Victorian period—the long narrative poem and the dramatic monologue—but unlike Browning, Bronte gave up writing poetry at the beginning of her professional career, when she became identified in the public mind as the author of the popular novel *Jane Eyre* (1847). Bronte's decision to abandon poetry for novel writing exemplifies the dramatic shift in literary tastes and the marketability of literary genres—from poetry to prose fiction—that occurred in the 1830s and 1840s. Her experience as a poet thus reflects the dominant trends in early Victorian literary culture and demonstrates her centrality to the history of nineteenth-century literature.

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