

Anne Brontë: the third sister

By Erin Nyborg

Anne Brontë (1820-1849), the third and youngest of the Brontë sisters, still remains sadly overlooked. Her novels, *Agnes Grey* [1] (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* [2] (1848) are not read or taught as often as Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* [3] or Emily's *Wuthering Heights* [4]. However, Anne's novels are just as bold and adventurous as her sisters' in tackling real-world issues directly: the position of the governess and the dangerous inequalities of contemporary marriage law.

Anne (writing under the pseudonym Acton Bell) describes the plight of governesses in her first novel, *Agnes Grey*. Agnes is forced to take up governessing when her father falls ill. She is at first excited by the prospect of making her own way in the world. At this time, teaching was one of the only 'respectable' professions for middle-class women. Anne draws on her experiences as a governess to the Ingham family in 1839 and the Robinsons from 1840-1845 to describe the impossible position Agnes finds herself in: her pupils refuse to do their lessons, but she lacks the authority necessary to discipline them. Worse yet, her employer is convinced that her children are angels. Anne's novel depicts the realities of governessing in more detail than Charlotte does in her own governess novel, *Jane Eyre*.

Anne tackles even more controversial material in her second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. When Gilbert Markham falls in love with the widow Helen Graham, she refuses his attempts at courting and sends him away with her diary to explain why. Gilbert discovers that Helen is married to the still-living Arthur Huntingdon, who is emotionally abusive, alcoholic, and adulterous. If discovered, she would be compelled to return to her husband.

When Anne wrote this novel, divorce could only be obtained through Parliament and was therefore only available to the very wealthy. As well, a wife could not sue for divorce because of adultery alone (though that was enough cause for a husband). Even if a separation took place, Helen's son (as well as her money) would remain with Huntingdon.

Anne was criticized for her stark portrayal of alcoholism and abuse. In the Biographical Notice of 1850, Charlotte claimed that 'the choice of subject was an entire mistake' and that Anne had 'hated her work' on the novel.[1] Critics accused her of 'a morbid love of the coarse, if not the brutal'.[2] In the Preface to the second edition, Anne defended her choice of subject: 'Is it better to reveal the snares and pitfalls of life to the young and thoughtless traveller, or to cover them with branches and flowers? O Reader! if there were less of this delicate concealment of facts [. . .] there would be less of sin and misery to the young of both sexes who are left to wring their bitter knowledge from experience?'.[3]

Anne's portrayal of the world as it really is, with all its faults and dangers, makes her, like her sisters, a great writer.

[1] Charlotte Brontë, 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell', in *Wuthering Heights*, by Emily Brontë,

ed. by Ian Jack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 322.

[2] Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, ed. by Herbert Rosengarten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 3.

[3] A. Brontë, p. 4.

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[1] <http://writersinspire.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/content/agnes-grey>

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[3] <http://writersinspire.org/content/jane-eyre>

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