

Charlotte Brontë: A Wish for Wings

Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) was born on April 21, 1816, the third daughter of Rev. Patrick and Maria Brontë, and was followed by Branwell (1817), Emily (1818), and Anne (1820). In 1820, the family moved to Haworth in the west riding of Yorkshire. Soon after, the Brontë children lost their mother to cancer and their two eldest sisters to tuberculosis. Charlotte would survive her younger siblings and out of a life of personal loss and hard struggle, became one of the greatest novelists the world has ever seen.



[1]

Painted by Evert A. Duyckinck, based on a drawing by George Richmond [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

The Brontë sisters hoped to leave their positions as governesses and set up their own school. To this end, Charlotte and Emily went to Brussels in 1842 for further instruction in French. There, Charlotte received individual attention from her teacher, Constantin Heger. Charlotte returned to Haworth in 1844 and wrote passionate, yearning letters to her beloved (but married) teacher:

'I will not resign myself to the total loss of my master's friendship - I would rather undergo the greatest bodily pains than have my heart constantly lacerated by searing regrets'. [A]

The school scheme never materialised, as pupils could not be found. Charlotte soon set herself a new

challenge: publication. The Brontë children had written from a young age and in 1846 the Brontë sisters published (pseudonymously) Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell [2], though only two copies were sold. Even before *Poems* was published, Charlotte was attempting to find a publisher for 'three distinct and unconnected tales': Emily's Wuthering Heights [3], Anne's Agnes Grey [4], and Charlotte's first novel, The Professor [5], which remained unpublished until 1857, after her death. [B]

Despite these failures, Charlotte began a second novel, Jane Eyre [6] (1847), which featured the journey of a passionate, orphaned child to independence, family, and love. It was the first published of the sisters' novels and was extremely popular, read by Queen Victoria (twice) and one of Charlotte's literary heroes, W.M. Thackeray. Reviewers could be more scathing, such as, Elizabeth Rigby who wrote:

'We do not hesitate to say that the tone of the mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has also written Jane Eyre.' [C]

As Charlotte was working on her third novel, *Shirley*, Branwell, Emily, and Anne died. The third volume of the novel was written as Charlotte grieved. She sent the completed manuscript to W.S. Williams, her publisher's reader, for much-needed comment, as Charlotte had lost her two best readers in losing her sisters.

In Shirley [7] (1849), Charlotte broadened her scope to look at contemporary social issues such as industrialisation, Chartism, and the 'Woman Question' through the lens of the Luddite riots and machine-breaking at the end of the Napoleonic wars. *Shirley* herself was a dramatized version of Emily Brontë, a strong, mystically feminist character who attempts to play a man's role in society.

Charlotte's final novel Villette [8] (1853) is, like The Professor [5], a Brussels school story and is narrated by Lucy Snowe, whose painfully self-contained psyche drove Matthew Arnold to complain that it was 'a hideous undelightful convulsed constricted novel'. [D] George Eliot, not yet then a novelist, loved it. Lucy, like Charlotte, begins the novel as a student in a *pensionnat* and then becomes a teacher, winning the love of her 'master' M. Paul Emanuel.

In 1854, Charlotte married her father's curate, Rev. Arthur Bell Nicholls, and in March, 1855 she died, possibly in early pregnancy.

While Charlotte will always be remembered for the losses she endured and for the gloomy isolation Haworth Parsonage seems to embody, what remains most inspiring are the four novels Charlotte left behind, especially *Jane Eyre* and the richly psychological *Villette*.

References

[A] Charlotte Brontë, 'To Constantin Heger, 8 January 1845: Translation', in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Margaret Smith, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995-2005), I, pp. 379-380 (p. 379).

[B] Brontë, 'To Messrs Aylott and Jones, 6 April 1846', *Letters*, p. 461.

[C] Elizabeth Rigby, 'From an Unsigned Review, Quarterly Review', in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Miriam Allott (London: Routledge, 1974), pp. 109-110.

[D] Matthew Arnold, 'Letter to Arthur Hugh Clough, 21 March 1853', in *The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. by Howard Foster Lowry (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), p. 132.

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