Out of Obscurity

The amazing story of three spinster sisters who shocked the world with their novels...

by Sarah C. age 15
Hugh Brunty
1755 - c. 1808

Eleanor “Alice” McClory
dates unknown

Thomas Branwell
1746 - 1808

Anne Carne
baptized 1744 - 1809

Nine other
children

Patrick Branwell
Brontë
1817-1848

Nine other
children

Maria Branwell
1783-1821

Elizabeth Branwell
1776-1842

Anne Brontë
1820-1849

Mr. Arthur Bell Nicholls
1818-1906

Charlotte Brontë
1816-1855

Emily Jane Brontë
1818-1848

Maria Brontë
1814-1825

Elizabeth Brontë
1815-1825

Patrick Brontë
1777-1861

Anne Brontë
1820-1849

Family Tree

The Brontë
The warm glow of firelight dances over the shadowy walls of the dining room of Haworth Parsonage. Three sisters sit around the wooden table and take turns reading aloud from wrinkled pages covered in writing. An icy blast of wind rattles the windowpane as Emily, eyes glowing with excitement, reads about an encounter with a ghost. Her older sister Charlotte shakes her head in disbelief and the youngest -- Anne -- listens in wide-eyed wonder. They do not know it now, but the excerpt from the book Emily has just read will one day be famous, and Charlotte and Anne’s novels will be read and re-read by people they will never meet! In fact, the Brontë sister’s books will make a lasting impression in the world of literature because each one reflects their lives, personalities, and worldviews.

Charlotte made her first entrance into the world on April 21, 1816. Her parents, Patrick and Maria Brontë, already had two young daughters -- Maria and Elizabeth -- at the time of Charlotte’s birth, but the family was far from complete. Three more children were born in the next four years: Patrick Branwell in 1817, Emily in 1818, and little Anne in 1820. The Brontë family was finally complete, but it was not to last -- Mrs. Brontë died in 1821 when Anne was only a year and a half old. Even though Mrs. Brontë’s sister, Elizabeth Branwell, came to take care of the children, Charlotte remarked of her mother, “I wish she had lived; and that I had known her” (qtd. in Fraser 359). Perhaps if Mrs. Brontë had lived, the girls’ childhoods would have contained less tragedy and more happiness (Brontë Museum, “Family Tree”).

Patrick Brontë
Charlotte’s close friend Ellen Nussey described Mr. Brontë as being “very polite and agreeable to me, paying rather elaborate old-fashioned compliments, but I was sadly afraid of him in my inmost soul; for I caught a glare of his stern eyes over his spectacles at Miss Brontë once or twice.”
In 1824, the Brontë sisters (with the exception of four year-old Anne) went to the Clergy Daughter’s School at Cowan Bridge. While there, Elizabeth and Maria both became so ill due to their mistreatment and poor living conditions that they were sent home. Unfortunately though, the damage was irreversible -- Maria died in the spring of 1825 and Elizabeth followed only weeks later. Naturally, this painful experience was ingrained in Charlotte’s memory, and she immortalized it by making Lowood School in her novel *Jane Eyre* a replica of Cowan Bridge. Charlotte even based one of the mistreated school girls in the book — Helen Burns — on Maria (Brontë Museum, “Family History”; Dinsdale 29). According to Charlotte’s close friend Elizabeth Gaskell, “Helen Burns is as exact a transcript of Maria Brontë as Charlotte’s wonderful power of reproducing a character could give” (qtd. in Fraser 39).

As a result of the tragic ordeal, Charlotte and Emily remained at Haworth for the next six years. The four remaining siblings spent countless hours reading and creating imaginary worlds using Branwell’s toy soldiers. Charlotte and Branwell called their world “Angria” while Emily and Anne named theirs “Gondal”. They enjoyed writing stories and poems about these worlds, and it may have
been this experience that ushered the Brontë sisters into the wonderful world of writing (Miller 5; Dinsdale 65).

Unfortunately, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne were unable to devote all of their time to writing. They lived in the real world and had real problems and tasks which occupied much of their time. Because their father did not have much money, the three sisters were forced to find a way to support themselves. The only suitable position was that of a governess or teacher, so Charlotte went to Miss Wooler's School in Roe Head in 1831 to further her education. Four years later, Emily was sent there as a pupil under Charlotte's care, but she became homesick and returned to Haworth after a short while. Anne arrived as a replacement for Emily, and her education there lasted until 1837. In February of 1842, Emily and Charlotte traveled to Brussels to learn at the Pensionnat Heger under Monsier Heger. Unfortunately, their stay there was concluded when Aunt Elizabeth Branwell – their benefactress – died in October of that year (Brontë Museum, “Family History”; Dinsdale 7, 32; Liukkonen, “Emily Brontë”).

With Aunt Elizabeth’s death, earning a living became even more important. Charlotte was a teacher at Miss Wooler’s from 1835-1838, and Emily taught at Miss Patchett’s School in Law Hill, Halifax, in 1839. Unlike Charlotte, Emily strongly disliked teaching – she preferred the school dog to her pupils – so she returned home after a relatively short time. Charlotte and Anne occupied several different governess positions throughout their lives, but Charlotte’s employments lasted a total of eleven months while Anne was a governess for more than five years. Interestingly enough, the main characters of Charlotte and Anne’s novels -- Jane Eyre and
On October 19, 1847, Jane Eyre was published by Smith, Elder & Co. Only two months later, Emily's Wuthering Heights and Anne's Agnes Gray were also published. Instead of using their real names, the Brontës chose male pseudonyms; Charlotte chose the name "Currer Bell", Emily, "Ellis Bell", and Anne, "Acton Bell". The Brontë sisters were now the Bell brothers, and not even the publishers knew their true identities! Because of this, the literary critics who read the Brontës' books were unbiased, and their opinions were not tarnished by bigotry. One person praised Jane Eyre as "one of the most powerful domestic romances which has been published for many years" (qtd. in Frank 237). People were shocked, however, by the amount of passion and cruelty portrayed in Wuthering Heights. A reader questioned "how a human being could have attempted [to write] such a book ... without committing suicide before he had finished a dozen chapters" (qtd. in Frank 237). Anne, or Acton as her readers knew her, received harsh criticism over The Tenant of Wildfell Hall because of its graphic portrayal of sin. Another publisher began to spread the rumor that Currer Bell was the author of all three books, so in July of 1848, Charlotte and Anne traveled to London and revealed their identities to Smith, Elder & Co. (Brontë Museum, “Family History”; Dinsdale 73; Frank 236-237; Ockerbloom). Mr. George Smith -- the publisher -- “could
scarcely believe that these small, retiring plain women in their old-fashioned dark frocks were the famous Currer and Acton Bell who had caused such a furore with their books” (Frank 245).

The Brontës’ novels were a sensation partly because their personalities shone through in their writings. Unbeknownst to many, Charlotte had a **penchant** for letters and wrote copious amounts to her friends, publisher, and literary critics. As evidenced by this love for letters, words were very powerful and important to her – “With words, Charlotte was in her element; letters, it might be said, were as much her medium as fiction” (Gordon 300). Sadly, even though Charlotte possessed the gift of an intelligent mind, she oftentimes had a self-deprecating attitude. She struggled with discontentment over her plain appearance and believed herself to be ugly. It is interesting to note the similarity between Charlotte and the title character of *Jane Eyre* – as Charlotte herself said to her sisters, “I will show you a heroine as plain and as small as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours” (Frank 226). Instead of making her the paragon of beauty, Charlotte modeled Jane after her own petite and unprepossessing self. It is also clear that Charlotte’s sharp intellect was reflected in Jane’s ability to think clearly and independently (Gordon 279-280, 283-284, 292, 298; Fraser 456-458). This combination of simplicity and intellect in Jane’s nature was new in the world of literature and added a tangible depth to Charlotte’s novel.

"I know what love is as I understand it; and if man or woman should be ashamed of feeling such love, then there is nothing right, noble, faithful, truthful, unselfish in this earth, as I comprehend rectitude, nobleness, fidelity, truth, and disinterestedness.”

- Charlotte Brontë
My dearest Ellen Nussey, 20th of May A.D. 1854

What a long time ‘tis been since I saw you! Yesterday afternoon I was reflecting on my stay at Miss Wooler’s school in Roe Head when an amazing fact dawned on me -- we have known each other for twenty-three years! I was rather shocked by that realization because it reminded me of my age -- I am almost forty years old!

My spinsterhood is coming to a close, Nellie, for I am to be married to Mr. Arthur Bell Nicholls. Yes, I am marrying the man who I formerly avoided at all costs! I had inwardly resigned myself to the prospect of being a spinster: I remember telling you that after being a spinster for so many years it was not necessary for me to marry anyone least of all Mr. Nicholls. But I am truly attracted to his strength and great passion -- I cannot, of course, say that I love him as Jane loves Rochester because my circumstances are different. Rochester is an imposing Byronic hero with a dark past while Mr. Nicholls is only a burly country curate.

I cannot help but think that it is exceedingly odd that after modeling the character of Jane -- her appearance, intellect, and beliefs -- after my exact image, I am going to marry a rather boring rector who resembles St. John Rivers! I have no doubt that Jane would be shocked by my choice, and I confess that I am still uncertain about marrying Mr. Nicholls.

I have fretted over my appearance for such a long time and worried that others would avoid me because of my plain features. I am as small as a child -- only four feet and ten inches tall -- and my diminutive figure is unable to
fill out an adult’s chemise. No one has ever sought my presence or praised my complexion, but Mr. Nicholls longs for my presence and praises every aspect of me! It is such a lovely thing to be sought after and enjoyed — how wonderful it feels to be cherished and admired by a man.

Oh Nell -- Mr. Nicholls has such “tender love for me” and my knowledge of him has “inclined me to esteem and if not love -- at least affection.” I am still unsure of my heart towards him though, and I hope to be filled with a strong love for him someday.

Please come to the wedding, dearest Nellie, it is planned to occur on the 29th of June. I would be obliged if you would procure a suitable wedding wardrobe for me because there are no shops in Haworth that sell what I require. The dress and bonnet need not be fancy -- “something that can be turned to decent use and worn after the wedding will be best, I think.”

Yours truly,
Charlotte Brontë
Emily also had a “razor-sharp intellect”, but it was of a different kind (Miller 186). While Charlotte liked to debate with others, Emily preferred to imagine by herself or with Anne. In fact, she was so engrossed in thinking creatively that she “had no time for the unimaginative” people around her (Gordon 281). *Wuthering Heights* is obviously a reflection of this because it contains richly Romantic characters and Gothic events. Emily was **recalcitrant** and preferred to be **untrammeled** because she “loved liberty: freedom to think her own heterodox thoughts, freedom from social pressures, freedom from having to submit to the will of others” (Miller 186). According to Charlotte, Emily’s “reserved nature occasions one great uneasiness of mind – it is useless to question her – you get no answers – it is still more useless to recommend remedies – they are never adopted” (qtd. in Miller 193). It is possible that Emily’s reserve and lack of trust in humanity sprang from the fear of being forced to conform to the world’s standards (Fraser 53, 271; Miller 185).

“Emily would never go into any sort of society herself...
When pressed to go, she would sometimes say, ‘What is the use? Charlotte will bring it home to me.’”

*Charlotte Brontë*

“... [Emily’s] extreme reserve seemed impenetrable, yet she was intensely lovable. She invited confidence in her moral power. Few people have the gift of looking and smiling, as she could look and smile -- one of her rare expressive looks was something to remember through life, there was such a depth of soul and feeling, and yet shyness of revealing herself, a strength of self containment seen in no other.”

*Ellen Nussey*
Emily Jane’s
Wednesday
Plans

{first} Take a walk on the moors just as the golden morning sun melts the mist

{second} Bake an apple pudding for tea time

{third} Sit with Anne and create a story about Sir John Ross and Sir Edward Perry in the world of Gondal

{fourth} Feed the dogs after tea time -- be sure to give Keeper an extra amount for sitting still

{fifth} Sketch the grasshopper warbler bird in the tall grass

{sixth} Picnic under the trees and watch the clouds journey across the sky

{seventh} Play Handel’s Suite No. 2 on the piano for Father

{eighth} Finish memorizing William Cowper’s “The Castaway”

{ninth} Reply to Ellen Nussey’s letter -- be sure to tell her about the powerful rainstorm on Ponden Kirk last Saturday

{tenth} Learn how to shoot Father’s revolver
Emily, however, was not the only reserved person in the Brontë family -- her younger sister Anne was also very quiet and unobtrusive. According to Charlotte, Anne’s character was milder and more subdued; she wanted the power, the fire, the originality of her sister, but was well-endowed with quiet virtues of her own. Long-suffering, self-denying, reflective, and intelligent, a constitutional reserve and taciturnity placed and kept her in the shade. (qtd. in Dinsdale 50)

Although she was normally quiet and reserved, Anne was a surprisingly strong individual. In a letter to a friend, she wrote, “I have no horror of death; if I thought it inevitable I think I could quietly resign myself to the prospect” (Dinsdale 52). Who could have guessed that such courage had its source in such a gentle person? Appearances can be deceiving: to the world’s eye, the Brontë sisters were only reserved spinsters, but in all actuality, they were passionate and intelligent human beings (Dinsdale 51).

“... the greatest worldly distinctions and discrepancies of rank, birth and fortune are as dust compared with the unity of accordant thoughts and feelings, and truly loving, sympathizing, heart and souls.”

- Anne Brontë

“... [Anne was] well acquainted with the main truths of the Bible respecting our salvation, but seeing them more through the law than the gospel, more as a requirement from God than His Gift in His Son, but her heart opened to the sweet views of salvation, pardon and peace in the blood of Christ, and she accepted His welcome to the weary and heavy laden sinner, conscious more of her not loving the Lord her God than of acts of enmity to Him.”

- Bishop James de la Trobe
Although important, the Brontës’ personalities were not the only real life aspects present in their novels -- each sister also incorporated her convictions into her story. Charlotte was an egalitarian and believed that women wasted themselves in “unnumbered hours ... [of] fine embroidery, sight-destroying lace-work, [and] marvelous netting and knitting” (Fraser 333). She advocated women’s rights and used her pen to fight for equality. One of the most famous lines from *Jane Eyre* is boldly feminist -- “Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain and little, I am heartless and soulless? You think wrong! I have as much soul as you – and full as much heart” (qtd. in Fraser 265)! Undoubtedly, Charlotte used her novel to rebel against society’s expectations of women. By writing a book overflowing with truth and intelligence, Charlotte demonstrated that women were just as capable of thinking deeply and clearly as men.

“...there is no more respectable character on this earth than an unmarried woman who makes her own way through life quietly persevering -- without support of husband or brother, and who ... retains in her possession a well-regulated mind, a disposition to enjoy simple pleasures, [and a] fortitude to support inevitable pains...”

-Charlotte Brontë

In a less overt way than Charlotte, Emily used *Wuthering Heights* to express her beliefs about the power of self. For instance, she thought that everyone was equal and capable of good or evil. Emily also believed that each person had an inner power that enabled them to survive and emotionally heal from cruelty (Jennings). In her masterpiece *Wuthering Heights*, Emily expressed this idea in Cathy’s angry response to her father-in-law’s cruelty:

Mr. Heathcliff YOU have NOBODY to love you; and, however miserable you make us, we shall have the revenge of thinking that your cruelty arises from your greater misery. You ARE miserable, are you not? Lonely, like the devil, and envious like him? NOBODY loves you -- NOBODY will cry for you when you die! I wouldn’t be you! (Brontë)
It is interesting to note the connection between Emily’s fascination with individual power and the plot of her book: *Wuthering Heights* is focused on humans and the effect their decisions have on others.

Not surprisingly, Anne held beliefs that were just as unwavering as her sisters’. When people were shocked by her candid representation of sin in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne *intransigently* replied,

I maintain it is better to depict them [evil characters] as they really are than as they would wish to appear. To represent a bad thing in its least offensive light, is doubtless the most agreeable course for a writer of fiction to pursue; but is it the most honest, or the safest? ... if there were less of this delicate concealment of facts ... there would be less of sin and misery. (qtd. in Ockerbloom)

As evidenced by the fact that she did not hold sin lightly, Anne was a deeply religious person. She believed that all sinners could eventually get to Heaven, and that conviction was a source of consolation and peace to her (Ockerbloom). Anne and her sisters exhibited true courage by stating their beliefs despite society’s *animus* toward them.

Unfortunately, the Brontës’ brother Branwell did not have the fortitude of his sisters. He had surrendered himself to alcohol and opium and was a disgrace to the family. In many ways, his tragic life and choices affected the subjects of his sisters’ writings -- for example, the lunatic character of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* is a reflection of the fact that Branwell was becoming more and more mentally crazy. Anne’s novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* “portrays, in the character of Arthur Huntingdon, a violent drunkard, who is clearly drawn from her brother Branwell” (Liukkonen, “Anne Brontë”). He can also be glimpsed in the passionate and increasingly mad character of Heathcliff from Emily’s *Wuthering Heights*. When Branwell died suddenly in September of 1848, a terrible chain of deaths in the Brontë family began.
The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Who am I to resist His mighty plan?
Branwell's funeral was this afternoon, and I admit that we are still in shock over it all. It was so unexpected and sudden that I scarcely had time to take a breath and blink before my brother was gone!
I did not really know Branwell in his final years - he had changed from the older brother I played with as a child to a raging soul addicted to all things evil. His life was so full of sin that I want to weep over it; the only comforting thought I possess is that God performs miracles and is willing to save all sinners. I can only hope and pray that He brought Branwell to Himself in those last few minutes. I wonder if my brother was aware of the events that occurred in his final moments — his body was so sickened and his mind so weakened.
Oh how I wish that he had resisted those vile substances! They enslaved him and drove him mad; more than once he held a pistol up to his or Father's head with the intention of shooting. My brother's addictions only brought suffering and ruin: he is dead, Father has no heir, and Charlotte, Emily, and I have no man that we might call our brother.
Now that I reflect on it, Branwell was very similar to the imaginary lords in his, Charlotte, Emily, and my fictitious worlds of Gondal and Angria — a dark man who let his desires rule his actions. It seems that my brother preferred his imaginary world to the real
world and wished to be like the characters he invented. Perhaps
Branwell did not love the real world; that supposition would
certainly explain his foolish decisions and devotions.
If only Branwell had resisted the temptation! Perhaps he would
still be alive and well as I write. He might have even married and
started a family; how wonderful it would have been to see little
children running around the Parsonage once more. I should have
liked to see nieces and nephews play on the moors -- what a joy it
would have been to hear their merry laughter and receive their
loving kisses!
But alas, this dream is unattainable now; Charlotte, Emily and I
will most likely remain spinsters for the remainder of our lives and
there will probably not be any more children in our house.
I cannot help but think that my brother’s sudden death is a sorry
substitute for my happy dream of having children nearby. I pray
that the Lord gives me faith in His enduring promises and
contentment in His decisions. Trusting is such a difficult endeavor
for me -- I daily struggle with doubting God’s perfect plan for my
life. I am inexpressibly relieved that it is Christ’s righteousness -- not
mine -- that brings about my salvation.
Branwell’s death has made me freshly aware of the fragility of life.
I see now that I cannot depend on my social position, appearance,
or good works. The only person who is satisfying -- a sure rock in
my anguish -- is the Lord. With His help, I will endeavor to use my
life as a means to glorify and treasure my loving Creator.

Yours Truly, Anne Brontë
After attending her brother’s funeral, Emily became sick with tuberculosis. Instead of battling against the sickness though, Emily seemingly resigned herself to her fate and slowly wasted away. She died three months after Branwell on December 19, 1848. As if that was not enough sickness and death, Anne also became ill. Unlike Emily, Anne was not yet ready to die – she wrote in a letter to a friend,

I wish it would please God to spare me not only for Papa’s and Charlotte’s sakes, but because I long to do some good in the world before I leave it. I have many schemes in my head ... I should not like them all to come to nothing, and myself to have lived to so little purpose. But God’s will be done. (qtd. in Dinsdale 52)

In hopes that being near the sea might cure her, Anne, Charlotte, and a friend left for Scarborough on May 24, 1849. But alas, their endeavors were inutile, and Anne died in Scarborough just four days after leaving Haworth (Brontë Museum, “Family History”; Fraser 263-267; Frank 255-256).

Needless to say, Charlotte was overwhelmed by this sudden turn of events. She tried to fill the void her sisters left with writing, and she published two more books in the following years -- Shirley in 1849 and Villette in 1853. On June 29, 1854, Charlotte married a curate named Mr. Arthur Bell Nicholls. It was a happy but brief marriage – Charlotte had just become pregnant when she died from tuberculosis on March 31, 1855 (Brontë Museum, “Family History”; Fraser 483).

Charlotte, Emily, and Anne’s writings left lasting impressions in the world of literature because each was written from the soul. They chose subjects that were near and dear to their hearts, and each novel was a reflection of their experiences, personalities, and beliefs. Each book seems grounded in reality because many of the events and characters are reflections of the sisters’ own experiences and personalities. The Brontës attained depth by reflecting their own experiences, personalities, and worldviews in the events, characters, and themes of the books.
Even though the Brontës have left both the imaginary and the real world, their literary works continue to inspire countless people all over the world.
For this project, I wrote both an expository research section and creative genres that incorporate creative new facts about the Brontës. In this section I will clarify what is fact and what is fiction for my genres.

Although they are technically not a genre, I interspersed several quotes throughout my essay. Each was a useful addition because it improved the flow of this project. All the quotes are factual and provide a glimpse into the Brontës’ opinions, personalities, and appearances (Frank 247-248; Fraser 47-48, 296; Gordon 284; Liukkehonen).

My first genre is an illustration of the Brontë family tree and it naturally contains only factual information (Brontë Museum). The two new facts that I shared are the Brontës’ grandparents’ names, deaths, and births. Unfortunately, I was unable to find the exact dates for some things -- see Mr. Brontë’s mother Eleanor McClory for example -- but I gave approximate years.

The second genre, pictures and captions, is distributed throughout my expository section. All of the information I included is factual (Armitage; Brontë Museum; Dinsdale 15, 51; Frank 148-149; Fraser 85; Miller 43; Thompson), and much of it is new. My two most important new pieces of information, however, are the facts that the Brontës drew inspiration from the moors around Haworth and that Emily used a landmark -- Ponden Kirk -- in her book *Wuthering Heights*. All of the pictures I used are from various websites.

Another genre I included is a make believe letter from Charlotte Brontë to her life-long friend Ellen Nussey. Much of it is fiction -- I do not know if Charlotte compared herself to Jane in the context of marriage -- but there are many factual pieces of information as well (Dinsdale 34; Fraser 464, 450, 381; Gordon 293). I introduced two new pieces of information in this genre: one, that Charlotte was petite and afraid that others would avoid her; two, that she asked Ellen Nussey to procure the bridal wardrobe. There are also two quotes from Charlotte Brontë herself which I included in this genre; the first was about Mr. Nicholl’s tenderness and Charlotte’s affection for him (Fraser 450), and the second was one of Charlotte’s requirements for her wedding clothes (Fraser 464).
The fourth genre that I incorporated into my project is a to-do list (“Emily Jane’s Wednesday Plans”). This list is fictional as I cannot be sure that Emily undertook all these activities on a Wednesday. Each “aspiration”, however, is based off of activities that Emily enjoyed or may have done (Dinsdale 48, 66; Frank 11, 138, 184-185, 192, 259). Most of the information in this list is new, but my two main facts are that Emily fed the Parsonage dogs and learned to shoot a revolver.

My final genre is an imaginary diary entry written by Anne Brontë on the day of her brother’s funeral. It is fictional for the most part -- I do not know if Anne desired nieces and nephews -- but the date of the entry is true (Branwell’s funeral took place on September 28) as is Branwell’s temptation to shoot himself (Dinsdale 68; Frank 251; Okerbloom). My two new pieces of information are Anne’s aptitude to doubt and Branwell’s similarity to the characters in the imaginary worlds of Gondal and Angria.

<http://mick-armitage.staff.shef.ac.uk/anne/ann-art2.html>.


<http://www.bronte.info/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=14&Itemid=37>


<http://litweb.net/biogs/bronte_anne.html>


<http://litweb.net/biogs/bronte_emily.html>


<http://www.wuthering-heights.co.uk/locations/pondenkirk.htm>