THE LIFE AND THE WORK OF THE BRONTË SISTERS

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***Abstract**: The lives of the Brontë sisters has been the subject of public interest and speculation since the deaths of Emily and Anne shortly after their brother Branwell's death. Although the Brontë family was a poor one, they were educated people. They did not belong to the working class, but they were not wealthy enough to be a middle-class family. So, their social position was indefinite, and for women it was more difficult than for men to make their own way in the world of Victorian England, especially to write and publish books. Therefore, the Brontë sisters, as educated but poor women, the only accessible social position to them, apart from marriage, was that of teacher or governess. These positions were greatly unpleasant as they also implied the lack of freedom, especially the lack of free time. Or, as we will see in this paper, the sisters were used to be independent persons, to lead their life by their rules and principles.*
***Keywords:** public interest, family, principles*

One cannot speak about the work of the Brontë sisters without mentioning their life and its influence on the sisters' later writing. Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë were the daughters of Patrick Brontë and Maria Branwell. Their father, born in 1777 in Ireland, was first a teacher in North Ireland; then he received a degree from Cambridge and became a clergyman. Maria Branwell was born in 1783, and came from an intelligent family in Cornwall, in the extreme south-west of England.

In 1816, the Brontë family was settled in Thornton, near the industrial town Bradford. This is the year when Charlotte was born, the third of six children, five girls and a boy. The next year Patrick Branwell was born, the only son, in 1818, Emily and in 1820, Anne. After the birth of the last daughter, the family moved at Howarth, a small, bleak town on the Yorkshire moors, where Patrick Brontë was appointed curate and where the children grew up. Although they were a mixture of Irish and Cornish, they had no experience of either Ireland or Cornwall. They lived in the northern part of England, and felt they belonged to that place.

Some critics explain the gloomy parts of Charlotte and Emily Brontë's novels as a consequence of the Haworth's influence on their spirit, through that desolate, wild landscape.

Their mother died in 1821 and Charlotte, her four sisters, Maria, Elizabeth, Emily, Anne, and their brother Branwell were left in the care of their aunt, Elisabeth Branwell.

Anne and her aunt were particularly close, and this loving adult role model may have strongly influenced Anne's personality and religious beliefs. As they pursued their education mainly at home, all the Brontë children became involved in a rich fantasy life and Charlotte and Branwell collaborated in the invention of the imaginary kingdom of Angria, while the kingdom of Gondal belonged to Emily and Anne. The volumes of the chronicles of Angria survived, but nothing of the Gondal saga, except some of Emily's poems. The relationship of these stories to the later novels is a matter of much interest to scholars.

In 1824, the four older sisters went to a school for the daughters of clergyman, called Cowan Bridge. Maria and Elizabeth died of tuberculosis the next year, and Charlotte attributed it to the ill management of the school. This saved Charlotte and

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Emily who were taken away from the school due to the grim conditions. Charlotte's sad experiences, her sufferings and miseries related to that school, were fictionalized in the infamous Lowood School of her novel *Jane Eyre*.

For several more years the four children stayed at home and were left almost entirely to themselves. Their father and aunt gave them some formal teaching, but for the most part they studied, read, and learnt what they wished. They used to read the books they found in their father's library, works of history, biography, and poetry, or books borrowed from the Keighley Mechanics' Institute Library. The children had a great deal of freedom to explore the surrounding countryside, read widely and created worlds of their own. They cared much about each other, and the three sisters suffered greatly, when their brother, who showed some talent as a painter and poet, later sank into drinking and drug use.

As a child, Emily was characterized by the secrecy of manner and also the lack of compromise, which would increase as the years passed. What was also characteristic to her, was her close connection to the Yorkshire moors.

She was a lonely person, she liked to wander on the moors, to write, draw, or play the piano. Emily proved to be a very good pianist, fact also sustained by Ellen Nussey.

Charlotte went away to school again, in 1831, at Roe Head, a much better school than Cowan Bridge. There, Miss. Wooler, the headmistress, behaved like a mother to her and she became friend of two colleagues, she would describe later in *Shirley*. A year later she returned home to continue her education and teach her sisters. When she was nineteen, Charlotte went back to Roe Head as a teacher, and Emily accompanied her as a pupil; but Emily was unable to adapt to the new life, and by October, was physically ill from homesickness. So, she was sent back home and Anne went to Roe Head in Emily's place. Anne made few friends there, she was quiet and hard working, and more importantly, determined to stay and get the education that would allow her to support herself. Her later poems express a deep attachment to her home, so there is no reason to suppose that she was less homesick there than her sisters. Anne and Charlotte do not appear to have been close during their time at Roe Head, but Charlotte was concerned about the health of her sister and, when Anne became seriously ill and underwent a religious crisis, she notified her father and sent Anne home.

All the three sisters had some experience as governesses or teachers, positions they bitterly disliked. Their life was harsh, as in some houses the conditions were unpleasant and they were treated badly. Nevertheless, their experiences provided much of the material of the novels they would write. They decided to open a school of their own, so Emily and Charlotte went to Brussels, to a private boarding school to improve their teaching qualifications. However, the death of their aunt compelled their return, and Emily stayed at Haworth as a housekeeper while Anne became governess in a family near New York, where she was joined as tutor by Branwell. Charlotte went back to Brussels, where she fell in love with Monsieur Heger, the husband of the lady she was working for; her experiences there formed the basis of the rendering, in *Villette*, of Lucy Snowe's loneliness, longing and isolation. Therefore, Charlotte had to leave Brussels because of her love for M. Heger, and return home. Anyway, in 1845, the family was together again. Branwell was dismissed from his tutorship, presumably because he had fallen in love with his employer's wife, and Anne decided to go home.

The school, they intended to open, did not work out, and the sisters turned entirely to their literary interests. Charlotte's discovery of Emily's poems led to the decision of publishing their verses; these appeared as *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton*

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Bell, each sister using her initials in these pseudonyms. They had to hide their identity, as at that time, women were not expected to write, this was supposed to be men's privilege. The poems did not attract any attention, and then, each sister began a novel. Charlotte's *The Professor* was rejected by publisher after publisher and she wrote *Jane Eyre* which was published in 1847 and made her famous; Anne wrote *Agnes Grey*, the study of a governess's life, and Emily conceived *Wuthering Heights*, which appeared a little later that year. Anne's second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, was the account of a drunkard's degradation and it was deeply related to her brother's life, while *Agnes Grey* accounted for her own experience.

However, by 1848, a series of tragedies began to hit the Brontë family. Branwell died, and at his funeral, Emily caught a chill and died of tuberculosis three months later, on 19 December. When she died, Keeper, her favorite dog, cried outside the bedroom door, and its groans lasted for weeks. The people in the village assumed that she had died of grief for her brother while Charlotte could never forget the sore experience of seeing her sister kill herself, by refusing any help from her sisters or from a doctor. The misfortune will not stop here and, the following year, Anne died of the same disease. After the death of her sisters, Charlotte remained with her father and continued to write. She married the reverend Arthur Bell Nicholls, in 1854, and for some months they seemed to have been happy together. However, on March 31, 1855, Charlotte died from complications of pregnancy. Her husband continued to live with Patrick Brontë and succeeded in publishing Charlotte's first novel, *The Professor*. After Patrick's death, Nicholls returned to his native Ireland, where he lived enough to see the Brontë sisters celebrated and admired as novelists.

Many critics studied the lives of the three sisters and proved that many elements of their novels were linked to their real life. One can draw a parallel between each sister's work and her own experiences; thus, in speaking about their novels, before analysing their structure and importance in the future development of the novel, let us first identify the degree of their life experience's impact on these masterpieces.

The work of Anne Brontë is considered to be morally perceptive, but it mainly dealt with her own experiences and did not go far beyond them. The writing of a number of her poems parallels with Anne's acquaintance with William Weightman, the new curate of her father, which may suggest that she fell in love with him. Patrick Brontë and others who worked with William Weightman spoke of the piety and dedication that he displayed in his clerical duties. So, it is possible that Anne, who was a religious person, and who always sought in religion a source of strength and consolation, may have been aware of this aspect of Weightman's character. It is such a character that she portrays in Edward Weston, and that her heroine, *Agnes Grey*, finds deeply appealing. There is considerable disagreement over this point; Edward Chitham argues strongly for this interpretation, while Juliet Barker remains unconvinced.

Besides, Anne's first novel is often associated with her years of governessing at Blake Hall, the home of the Ingham family, and then at Thorp Green, at the Robinsons. Her heroine's first position is a similar situation with hers at Blake Hall. Anne's fictional descriptions convey both detail and conviction, and independent anecdotes suggest that the Ingham children may well have been models for the Bloomfield children of the book. As adults, Cunliffe and Mary Ingham were known to be difficult and wilful; if they were as unmanageable in real life as the children of the book, Anne's stay at Blake Hall was hardly pleasant. The Inghams, unsatisfied with their children's progress, dismissed Anne at the end of the year. The same situation is to be found in the novel.

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The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, Anne's second novel, deals with several themes: the preparation of young women for marriage, an issue affecting the young Robinson girls, the preparation of young boys for adulthood, a particularly salient concern, given Branwell's failure to fulfill his youthful promise. Moreover, Anne emphasizes the degradation of drunkenness and violence, and any initial attractiveness of Huntingdon, is outweighed by her painstaking and detailed description of his degradation and death. It is believed that many of these details were based on Anne's observation of her brother. But, what is really amazing is the fact that she defies Victorian conventions and even laws, in letting her heroine slam the door against her husband, or run with her child, while at that time, a married woman had no independent legal existence, apart from her husband.

Another element related to Anne's life is that both her heroines write poetry. Agnes Grey refers to poems as "pillars of witness" in a passage that may well reflect Anne's own view.

Charlotte Brontë, more than either of her sisters, considered writing as a career, and went about it with a consciousness of the reading public and its tastes. One can not separate the work and the writer, as they merge together into a whole. Her first novel, which was refused by publishers in the author's lifetime, fictionalizes Charlotte's falling in love with Mr. Heger, in Brussels. *The Professor* is unique among her novels for having a male protagonist, William Crimsworth, who rejects his inheritance and goes to Brussels to find his fortune. In the preface of the book, the author gives an account of how she shaped the character.

The last novel, *Villette*, is also a deeply autobiographical one, considered a mature version of *The Professor*. It is the story of a young Victorian woman, Lucy Snowe, who tries to find her place in Brussels; it is an emotional and a memorable account of the pain of unrequited love. Lucy Snowe is an orphan, who had to find her way in the world all alone, as she has nobody to rely on or to ask for help. She is neither beautiful nor rich, but she has a great heart. She is first the governess of Madame Beck's children, who possessed a girls' school in Brussels, then she works as a teacher and eventually falls in love with another teacher, Emanuel Paul. Her life is full of hardships and miseries and sometimes she feels she does not have the power to go on, as she confesses.

Nevertheless, the novel which made Charlotte famous was *Jane Eyre*. It is, as well as the other novels by Charlotte Brontë, born from a hard life, a life of sufferings, anxiety, compulsions which sharpened the intelligence of this sensitive person. She did not use literature as a means to escape from the cruel reality, but as a way to utter the truths she experienced, to express her revolts, disappointments and dreams. What is specific to her writing is the deep inside into the interior life of the characters; she puts apart the appearances, the masks and gets to the real person.

The first part of *Jane Eyre* is based on Charlotte's reminiscences of her childhood, especially the period lived at Cowan Bridge School, which was far from being a pleasant one. The misfortune, sorrows and despair underwent by the little girl are still present and never forgotten by the adult who now narrates her story and recreates her school in a new establishment, Lowood. Jane Eyre is a ten-year-old orphan who lives in the house of her aunt, Mrs. Reed. There, she is badly treated by all the members of the family and she suffers greatly. As Mrs. Reed wants to get rid of her, she sends Jane to Lowood, a charity school for girls where she experiences starvation, cold, and illness. She gives a brief account of her life at Lowood in Chapter 7.

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Jane will spend eight years in this establishment, as a pupil and then as a teacher. But, she needs a change in her life and decides to leave Lowood, as she finds a position as a governess at Thornfield, in the English Midlands. Jane's position is related to the writer's experience as a governess. So, Charlotte Brontë, by using this character in her novel, she exposes the middle-class woman feelings, desires and status, she fight for woman's right to enjoy life, to live free as man do; she has the courage to proclaim, in the Victorian century, the equality between man and woman in love and marriage.

Shirley, the next novel, is placed in the latter part of the Napoleonic Wars and it is generally regarded as a social novel and a human one as well. Shirley is the prototype of the independent, confident woman who has the freedom to act, feel as she wishes and, who has the power to defy conventions and mentalities. *Shirley* affirms the value of feeling and imagination in a society that seeks to reject them. Although it is a novel rich in historic details, it also sustains the cause of women who needed more useful occupations, exposing the consequences of women's inactivity. Caroline Helstone expresses her wish to work, to do something with her life, but everybody disapproves her intention. She often meditates on this subject, her thoughts being totally in contradiction with that period's expectations:

Though it was Charlotte who was most famous and popular of the three sisters during her own lifetime, it is Emily's *Wuthering Heights* that is today considered the greatest contribution that the sisters have made to literature.

Emily Brontë's novel is a mixture of Romanticism and Realism. *Wuthering Heights* is a novel about the British society, regarding the poor and the rich, their relations, the fight for power and money. It alludes to more contemporary issues such as child abuse, alcoholism, attitudes toward women and social rules. It is a novel about love, vengeance and the degradation of the human being.

Wuthering Heights is the least autobiographical of any of the sisters' writings, depending more on imagination than experience. It is the story of two families, the Earnshaws and the Lintons, and their relationships with Heathcliff, an orphan. In contrast to most Victorian writing, it limits itself to the world of its characters, and insists more on what the characters thought and were. Furthermore, from the first chapter the reader is pulled into the action and suspense instead of having many pages of introduction. The novel is also limited to a certain space, as the action takes place strictly in the area of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. Events are revealed in great detail there, but when a character leaves this place, nothing is told of their situation.

The novel exists on two levels, as a metaphysical novel of the destruction and re-establishment of cosmic harmony and as a realistic depiction of everyday life in Yorkshire in the mid-19th century.

Emily Brontë's dramatic and poetic presentation and unusual structure distinguished *Wuthering Heights* from the other novels of the time and throughout history.

Besides, the narrative structure of the novel is quite unique, as the author uses techniques which would now be considered modern. She gives up the omniscient point of view of the traditional Victorian novel and uses multiple narrators and the Chinese box technique**.** These narrative techniques bring her close to Postmodernism and combine to make this novel 'an astonishing work', as F.R.Leavis states in his book *The Great Tradition*.[1] Moreover, he asserts in the introductory chapter of this book that

[1] See F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962, p. 38

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Emily Brontë was a genius and that her novel should be seen, in the history of the English novel, as a 'kind of sport'. But, John S. Whitley, commenting on Leavis's statement, suggests that the novel 'seems to be a joining of the two traditions he mentions, along with a strong infusion of the Gothic novel for good measure'.[1]

The story is told through the eyes (sometime blinkered) and the minds of two narrators: Mr. Lockwood and Ellen (Nelly) Dean. The interaction of Nelly and Mr. Lockwood creates suspense between the sections of the story. When Nelly breaks off her story one wonders what will happen next. The point of view shifts from Lockwood to Nelly and time moves from the present to the past and returns to the present. Lockwood is the voice of the 'present' and an 'outsider', while Nelly is the voice of the 'past' and an 'insider'. The narrator, Mr. Lockwood is a minor character in the story. He is being told this tale by another narrator, Nelly Dean. At certain points in the book, different characters become narrators who tell their story to Nelly, who then tells to Lockwood. But, the main element is the narration of Nelly. She is a housekeeper, a confidante of the children she takes care of, a sentimental woman, but most of all the story-teller.

The novel seems to demystify the position of the family and most of all the male authority. But, apart from other merits of the novel, we have to keep in mind Emily Brontë's modern approach to the text, which lies in the complex structure of the novel. There are many narrator shifts and the way she succeeded in integrating every character's narrative into Nelly's is quite remarkable.

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[1] John S. Whitley, *Introduction to Emily Brontë, Wuthering Heights*, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth,1992, p.vi

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