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Summary Article: **Brontë**

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(brŏn'tē), family of English novelists, including **Charlotte Brontë**, 1816–55, English novelist, **Emily Jane Brontë**, 1818–48, English novelist and poet, and **Anne Brontë**, 1820–49, English novelist.

Lives and Works

The Brontë sisters were daughters of Patrick Brontë (1777–1861), an Anglican clergyman of Irish birth, educated at Cambridge. In 1820 Patrick Brontë became incumbent of Haworth, West Riding of Yorkshire. The next year his wife died, and her sister, Elizabeth Branwell, came to the parsonage to care for the six Brontë children, five girls and one boy, Branwell. Maria and Elizabeth, the two oldest girls, were sent to the Cowan Bridge school for the daughters of poor clergymen. In spite of the harsh conditions there, Charlotte and Emily were also sent in 1824, but were brought home after Maria and Elizabeth contracted tuberculosis and died.

At home for the next five years, the children were left much to themselves, and they began to write about an imaginary world they had created. This escapist writing, transcribed in tiny script on small pieces of paper, continued into adulthood and is a remarkable key to the development of genius in Charlotte and Emily. In 1831, Charlotte was sent to Miss Wooler's school at Roe Head. She became a teacher there in 1835, but in 1838 she returned to Haworth. At home she found the family finances in wretched condition. Branwell—talented as a writer and painter, on whom his sisters' hopes for money and success rested—had lost three jobs and was declining into alcoholism and opium addiction.

To increase their income Charlotte and her sisters laid ill-considered plans to establish a school. In order to study languages Emily and Charlotte spent 1842 at the Pensionnat Héger in Brussels, but returned home at the death of their aunt, who had willed them her small fortune. Both girls were offered positions at the *pensionnat*, but only Charlotte returned in 1843. She went home the following year, because, it is thought, she was in love with M. Héger and had aroused the jealousy of Mme Héger. Mr. Brontë's failing eyesight and the rapid degeneration of Branwell made this an unhappy period at home.

When Charlotte discovered Emily's poetry in 1845, Anne revealed hers, and the next year the collected poems of the three sisters, published at their own expense, appeared under the pseudonyms Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell. In 1847 Emily's novel *Wuthering Heights* and Anne's *Agnes Grey* were published as a set. Although the novel *The Professor* by Charlotte was rejected, her *Jane Eyre* (1847) was accepted and published with great success. The identity of the sisters as authors was at first unknown even to their publishers. It was not until after the publication of Charlotte's *Shirley* in 1849 that the truth was made public.

By the publication date tragedy had all but destroyed the Brontë family. In Sept., 1848, Branwell died; Emily caught cold at his funeral and, refusing all medical aid, died of tuberculosis the following December. Anne, whose *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* appeared in 1848, also died of tuberculosis in May, 1849. Now that the people who had occupied most of her life were gone, Charlotte began to make trips to London where she was lionized. Her *Villette* appeared in 1853. In 1854 she married her father's curate, Arthur Bell Nichols, with whom she seems to have been happy. She died, however, of pregnancy toxemia complicated by the Brontë susceptibility to tuberculosis, after only a year of

marriage. *The Professor* was published posthumously in 1857.

An Appraisal

Of the three prodigiously gifted Brontë sisters Anne has been judged the least talented. Nonetheless, her novels have been widely praised for their realism, integrity, and moral force. *Agnes Grey* is the unadorned story of a governess's life and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* tells of a young girl's marriage to a rake.

Charlotte Brontë was the most professional of the sisters, consciously trying to achieve financial success from the family's literary efforts. Her novel *Jane Eyre*, the story of a governess and her passionate love for her Byronic employer, Mr. Rochester, is ranked among the great English novels. Strong, violently emotional, somewhat melodramatic, *Jane Eyre* brilliantly articulates the theme found in all Charlotte's work—the need of women for both love and independence.

The undisputed genius of the family was Emily Brontë. An unyielding and enigmatic personality, she produced only one novel and a few poems, yet she is ranked among the giants of English literature. Her masterpiece, *Wuthering Heights*, is the wild, passionate story of the intense, almost demonic, love between Catherine Earnshaw and the Gypsy foundling Heathcliff. The action of the story is chaotic and unremittingly violent; its characters are less people than forces. Indeed, the novel would be extraordinarily difficult to read were it not for the power of Emily Brontë's vision and the beauty and energy of her prose. In addition, some of her powerful lyrics are counted with the best of English poetry.

Bibliography

The early (1857) biography of Charlotte by Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell, although containing many inaccuracies and distortions, is still valuable, as are the books on the Brontës by C. K. Shorter. The poems of Emily have been edited by C. W. Hatfield (1941), the Brontë letters by M. Spark (1954), selected letters by J. Barker (1998).

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