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THE LIFE AND LITERARY PATH OF THE BRONTE SISTERS

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Abstract: In 1824, the four eldest girls (excluding Anne) entered the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge, which educated the children of less prosperous members of the clergy, and had been recommended to Mr Brontë. The following year, Maria and Elizabeth fell gravely ill and were removed from the school, later dying on 6 May and 15 June 1825, respectively.

Key words: "charity schools", Quarterly Review, **morals, realism,** challenge

Charlotte and Emily were also withdrawn from the school and returned to Haworth. Charlotte expressed the traumatic impact that her sisters' deaths had on her in her future works. In Jane Eyre, Cowan Bridge became Lowood, Maria inspired the young Helen Burns, the cruel mistress Miss Andrews inspired the headmistress Miss Scatcherd, and the tyrannical headmaster Rev. Carus Wilson, Mr Brocklehurst.

Tuberculosis, which afflicted Maria and Elizabeth in 1825, also caused the eventual deaths of three of the surviving Brontës: Branwell in September 1848, Emily in December 1848, and, finally, Anne in May 1849.

Patrick Brontë faced a challenge in arranging for the education of the girls of his family, which was barely middle class. They lacked significant connections and he could not afford the fees for them to attend an established school for young ladies. One solution was the schools where the fees were reduced to a minimum—so called "charity schools"—with a mission to assist families like those of the lower clergy.

(Barker had read in the Leeds Intelligencer of 6 November 1823 reports of cases in the Court of Commons in Bowes: he later read of other cases, of 24 November 1824 near Richmond, in the county of Yorkshire, where pupils had been discovered gnawed by rats and suffering so badly from malnutrition that some of them had lost their sight.) Yet for Patrick, there was nothing to suggest that the Reverend Carus Wilson's Clergy Daughters' School would not provide a good education and good care for his daughters. The school was not expensive and its patrons (supporters who allowed the school to use their names) were all respected people. Among these was the daughter of Hannah More, a religious author and philanthropist who took a particular interest in education. More was a close friend of the poet William Cowper, who, like her, advocated extensive, proper and well-rounded education for young girls. The pupils included the offspring of different prelates and even certain acquaintances of Patrick Brontë including William Wilberforce, young women whose fathers had also been educated at St John's College, Cambridge. Thus Brontë believed Wilson's school to have many of the necessary guarantees needed for his daughters to receive proper schooling.

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The children became interested in writing from an early age, initially as a game. They all displayed a talent for narrative, but for the younger ones it became a pastime to develop them. At the center of the children's creativity were twelve wooden soldiers which Patrick Brontë gave to Branwell at the beginning of June 1826. These toy soldiers instantly fired their imaginations and they spoke of them as the Young Men, and gave them names. However, it was not until December 1827 that their ideas took written form, and the imaginary African kingdom of Glass Town came into existence, followed by the Empire of Angria. Emily and Anne created Gondal, an island continent in the North Pacific, ruled by a woman, after the departure of Charlotte in 1831. In the beginning, these stories were written in little books, the size of a matchbox about 1.5 by 2.5 inches (38 mm × 64 mm) and cursorily bound with thread. The pages were filled with close, minute writing, often in capital letters without punctuation and embellished with illustrations, detailed maps, schemes, landscapes and plans of buildings, created by the children according to their specializations. The idea was that the books were of a size for the soldiers to read. The complexity of the stories matured as the children's imaginations developed, fed by reading the three weekly or monthly magazines to which their father had subscribed, or the newspapers that were bought daily from John Greenwood's local news and stationery store.

Literary and artistic influence. These fictional worlds were the product of fertile imagination fed by reading, discussion and a passion for literature. Far from suffering from the negative influences that never left them and which were reflected in the works of their later, more mature years, the Brontë children absorbed them eagerly.

The periodicals that Patrick Brontë read were a mine of information for his children. The Leeds Intelligencer and Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, conservative and well written, but better than the Quarterly Review that defended the same political ideas whilst addressing a less-refined readership (the reason Mr. Brontë did not read it), were exploited in every detail. Blackwood's Magazine, in particular, was not only the source of their knowledge of world affairs, but also provided material for the Brontës' early writing. For instance, an article in the June 1826 number of Blackwood's, provides commentary on new discoveries from the exploration of central Africa. The map included with the article highlights geographical features the Brontës reference in their tales: the Jibbel Kumera (the Mountains of the Moon), Ashantee, and the rivers Niger and Calabar. The author also advises the British to expand into Africa from Fernando Po, where, Christine Alexander notes, the Brontë children locate the Great Glass Town. Their knowledge of geography was completed by Goldsmith's Grammar of General Geography, which the Brontës owned and annotated heavily

The children's imagination was also influenced by three prints of engravings in mezzotint by John Martin around 1820. Charlotte and Branwell made copies of the prints Belshazzar's Feast, Déluge, and Joshua Commanding the Sun to Stand Still upon Gibeon (1816), which hung on the walls of the parsonage.

Martin's fantastic architecture is reflected in the Glass Town and Angrian writings, where he appears himself among Branwell's characters and under the name of Edward de Lisle, the greatest painter and portraitist of Verdopolis, the capital of Glass Town. One of Sir Edward de Lisle's major works, Les Quatre Genii en Conseil, is inspired by Martin's illustration for John Milton's Paradise Lost. Together with Byron, John Martin seems to have been one of the artistic influences essential to the Brontës' universe.

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Anne's morals and realism. The influence revealed by Agnes Grey and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall is much less clear. Anne's works are largely founded on her experience as a governess and on that of her brother's decline. Furthermore, they demonstrate her conviction, a legacy from her father, that books should provide moral education. This sense of moral duty and the need to record it, are more evident in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. The influence of the gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe, Horace Walpole, Gregory "Monk" Lewis and Charles Maturin is noticeable, and that of Walter Scott too, if only because the heroine, abandoned and left alone, resists importunities not only through her almost supernatural talents, but by her powerful temperament.

Jane Eyre, Agnes Grey, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, Shirley, Villette and even The Professor present a linear structure concerning characters who advance through life after several trials and tribulations, to find a kind of happiness in love and virtue, recalling works of religious inspiration of the 17th century such as John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress or his Grace abounding to the Chief of Sinners.[53] In a more profane manner, the hero or heroine follows a picaresque itinerary such as in Miguel de Cervantes (1547–1616), Daniel Defoe (1660–1731), Henry Fielding (1707–1764) and Tobias Smollett (1721–1771). This lively tradition continued into the 19th century with the rags to riches genre to which almost all the great Victorian romancers have contributed. The protagonist is thrown by fate into poverty and after many difficulties achieves a golden happiness. Often an artifice is employed to effect the passage from one state to another such as an unexpected inheritance, a miraculous gift, grand reunions, etc, and in a sense it is the route followed by Charlotte's and Anne's protagonists, even if the riches they win are more those of the heart than of the wallet. Apart from its Gothic elements, Wuthering Heights moves like a Greek tragedy and possesses its music, the cosmic dimensions of the epics of John Milton, and the power of the Shakespearian theatre. One can hear the echoes of King Lear as well as the completely different characters of Romeo and Juliet. The Brontës were also seduced by the writings of Walter Scott, and in 1834 Charlotte exclaimed, "For fiction, read Walter Scott and only him—all novels after his are without value."

Charlotte envisaged a joint publication by the three sisters. Anne was easily won over to the project, and the work was shared, compared and edited. Once the poems had been chosen, nineteen for Charlotte and twenty-one each for Anne and Emily, Charlotte went about searching for a publisher. She took advice from William and Robert Chambers of Edinburgh, directors of one of their favourite magazines, Chambers's Edinburgh Journal. It is thought, although no documents exist to support the claim, that they advised the sisters to contact Aylott & Jones, a small publishing house at 8, Paternoster Row, London, who accepted, but at the authors' own risk since they felt the commercial risk to the company was too great. The work thus appeared in 1846, published using the male pseudonyms of Currer (Charlotte), Ellis (Emily) and Acton (Anne) Bell. These were very uncommon forenames but the initials of each of the sisters were preserved and the patronym could have been inspired by that of the vicar of the parish, Arthur Bell Nicholls. It was in fact on 18 May 1845 that he took up his duties at Haworth, at the moment when the publication project was well advanced.

The book attracted hardly any attention. Only three copies were sold, of which one was purchased by Fredrick Enoch, a resident of Cornmarket, Warwick, who in admiration, wrote to the publisher to request an autograph—the only extant single document carrying the three authors' signatures in their pseudonyms, and they continued creating their prose, each one producing a book a year later.

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