

### **The Brontë family**

In 1847, Smith Elder and Co. published a novel by a new author of whom no one had heard. The author's name was Currer Bell. The book was called "Jane Eyre". It caused an instant sensation. Queen Victoria herself was thrilled by the novel, and wrote in her Journal: "Finished "Jane Eyre" which is really a wonderful book ... so powerfully and admirably written." People have been raving about "Jane Eyre" since. It is one of the most readable and exciting novels in the English language. It is the story of how a tiny, outwardly unremarkable girl has her dreams fulfilled after lots of sufferings.

But who was Currer Bell? Not long before, in 1846, a small book "Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell" had been published. It had made no impact whatsoever, even though one of the poets, Ellis Bell, was a person of unique genius. Out of a thousand published copies, only two were sold. "Wuthering Heights" by Ellis Bell was published in the same year as "Jane Eyre", and, very surprisingly to us, it made very little impression on the public. In 1847 Acton Bell's "Agnes Grey" was also published – but its great qualities seemed to be unnoticed by everyone in the midst of the "Jane Eyre" mania which swept London in 1848.

Who on earth were this mysterious family? Acton, Ellis and Currer Bell were obviously some sort of pseudonym. The publisher wanted to be assured about the author and asked him (her? them?) to come to London. George Smith was shocked when a little while later he saw two strangely dressed little ladies (indeed, under five feet in height), pale-faced and anxious-looking entering his office, one of them stating she was Currer Bell – no, in fact, she was Charlotte Brontë, and her companion was her sister Anne. The sisters were then given a hearty welcome, spending several days in London and visiting the Royal Opera, the National Gallery, and the Royal Academy. In the course of these days, Mr. Smith was able to discover that Charlotte Brontë, this shy, tiny woman, was by no means a weakling. She had a strong, even forceful personality, a good sense of humour, and high intelligence.

At this date, she was thirty-two years old, by nineteenth-century standards a spinster, living with her father, brother and sisters in Haworth, a Yorkshire parsonage. Her father, the Reverend Patric Brontë, was a self-made man of unusual accomplishments. His background was peasant, but he became a schoolmaster and eventually came to Cambridge. They were an extraordinary close family. The Brontë children inhabited the curious imaginative world of their own creation. Emily's imagined world, a passionate mystical place, was called Gondal. Charlotte's imagined kingdom was Angria, an absolutely different one from that of Emily's – comic and realistic. The sisters also differed in that Charlotte's spirit was looking for ways to escape Haworth, whereas Emily's spirit never left the place, even when she was compelled to go away to seek education. The moorland of Yorkshire inspired much of Emily's greatest literary masterpieces.

the girls never escaped.

After a delightful period of five years at home, when Charlotte and Emily did not go to school, they were sent off to Roe Head, a very nice school. Charlotte was evidently a born academic and flourished there. She surely had the kind of brain which would have benefited from further education at a university – quite out of the question at this time, of course. Emily, who had isolated herself in the world of her own dreams, was not happy there and soon left. Anne, the youngest child, also came there and did well. Charlotte's and Anne's good French enabled them to earn their own living by working as governesses. This experience was not the one which they later remembered with warm feelings but it enabled Anne to write her "Agnes Grey".

Of course, their teenage years were the happiest for four surviving Brontë children – besides the three sisters, there also was their brother Branwell to whom the girls were very devoted. By day the routines of the Parsonage absorbed much of their emotional energy – they were passionately house-proud and liked all that polishing and cleaning (it is said that Charlotte had a domestic genius as well as a genius for writing); besides, they looked after their geese and dogs. But they were also fascinated by the delights of Nature and Art. All were devoted to animals and birds, and many of their paintings have animals as their subjects. All were accomplished sketchers and painters. All four were musical. Emily was a brilliant pianist – the piano which Mr. Brontë bought for her still survives at the Parsonage – and Branwell played the church organ wonderfully. And all four were writers, so at the end of a day, they would assemble in a small room to read aloud from their chronicles of Angria and Gondal. The room looks really very small, but you should remember that all the siblings but Emily (who was five feet six) were very tiny indeed.

Branwell received home education from his father, who taught him better than many schools of the time. Branwell's translation of "The Odes of Horace" was reprinted in the twentieth century. His chosen field, after much family discussion, was painting. He was sent off to the Royal Academy, but don't even know if he got there. The most noticeable example of his talent is his famous picture, the depiction of his sisters, which now hangs in the National Portrait gallery in London. It is one of the most emotional portraits in the whole Gallery.

To escape the boredom of the governessdom Charlotte and Emily came to a girls' school in Belgium. There Charlotte fell hopelessly in love with Mr. Heger, the school Principal. His background was not ordinary: he had taken part in the Belgian Revolution. In temperament, he had much in common with Mr. Rochester from "Jane Eyre": his temper was furious, but he could also be kind and generous. He was an inspired and brilliant teacher, possessing a kind of intellectual magnetism with children. Love for him was to become the dominant and strongest emotional fact in Charlotte's life – at least for the next five years, perhaps for ever.

the loss of appetite, the feverish, sleepless nights followed, but Emily refused to see any doctor. At this point two further reviews of “Wuthering Heights” appeared which were very hostile. Charlotte wrote that journalists were “blind as any bat, insensate as any stone to the merits of Ellis”. But Emily greeted it with a smile.

Her soul was no coward. She refused to go to bed, she refused even to acknowledge that she was ill. She resisted death for as long as she needed to do so. Then she went, without fuss. Charlotte wrote in a letter: “Emily is nowhere here now ... We have laid her cherished head under the church aisle beside my mother’s, my two sisters’ – dead long ago – and my poor hapless brother’s ... Well, the loss is ours, not hers, and some sad comfort I take as I know ... the wind ... and the frost ... bring her no more suffering ... cannot reach her grave ... we have not the conflict of the strangely strong spirit and the fragile frame before us – once seen, never to be forgotten.”

Charlotte’s destiny was different. She was marked out as the survivor, and she did remain the last of the siblings to be alive after Anne died. “Papa has now me only – the weakest, puniest, least promising of his six children.” Charlotte had become very famous by that time and entered the world of Victorian intellectual society. James Taylor, a partner in her editor’s business, fell in love with her and proposed to her, but she did not love him. She wrote: “If Mr. Taylor be the only husband fate offers, single I must remain.” Fate, eventually, offered her another man for a husband. He was one of her father’s curates, an Irishman called Arthur bell Nicholls. The wedding was fixed for 29 June, 1854.

The next six months Charlotte was very happy but her health was poor: she had a bad cold and no appetite. She was confined to her bed and once exclaimed to her husband: “Oh, I am not going to die, am I? He will not separate us – we have been so happy.” She died on 31 March 1855. Her father lived for another six years, fully aware that his children had been exceptional people – at least one and possibly two genuises, and all four who survived childhood remarkably talented. Mr. Nicholls remained with him as his faithful nurse and companion. When Mr. Brontë died, Nicholls returned to Ireland where he married again. He never quite recovered from the loss of Charlotte. The lively Richmond drawing of her always hung in his dining room. When he died in 1906, his wife had the coffin placed beneath Charlotte’s face, as he had asked. He spent his last days meditating upon the reunion with Charlotte: “I wonder how it will be?”

Now millions of tourists or pilgrims flock each year to Haworth and stream through the little Parsonage house which, since 1928, has been owned by Brontë society and run as a museum. Here may be seen Charlotte’s tiny gloves and shoes; the sketches which unhappy Branwell made; the piano where Emily played, the sofa where she died. It is one of the best-run museums of its kind in the world, rivalled only perhaps by the Tolstoy museum in

1. What do you think of the Brontë family – the father and his children?
2. What impressed you most about the siblings' relation?
3. When you were younger, did you use to write books about your invented world, like Charlotte and Emily Brontë?
4. What talents did you have when you were a little child? Which of them have you developed into something you can now do quite well?
5. There have always been child prodigies, but few of them live up to their parents' or teachers' expectations. Why do you think it happens? What makes a child prodigy into a genius?
6. In which ways were Charlotte and Emily similar and different? Describe their characters.
7. How did the sisters' life influence their writings?
8. Read the extracts from Charlotte's letter, then translate them and comment on them.
9. Do you agree that the early deaths of the Brontës are not tragic?
10. Can you think of any Russian writer who died young after his life "in a sense was complete"?

### **Jane Eyre** *(Part I)*

There was no possibility of taking a walk this day. We had been wandering, indeed, in the leafless shrubbery an hour in the morning; but since dinner (Mrs. Reed, when there was no company, dined early) the cold winter wind had brought with it clouds so sombre, and a rain so penetrating, that further outdoor exercise was now out of the question.

I was glad of it: I never liked long walks, especially on chilly afternoons: dreadful to me was the coming home in the raw twilight, with nipped fingers and toes, and a heart saddened by the chidings of Bessie, the nurse, and humbled by the consciousness of my physical inferiority to Eliza, John and Georgiana Reed. John and Georgiana were now gathered round their mama in the drawing-room; she lay on a sofa by the fireside, and with her darlings around her (for the time neither quarrelling nor crying) looked perfectly happy. Me she had dispensed from joining the group, saying, "She regretted to be under the necessity of keeping me at a distance; but until she heard from Bessie, and could discover by her own observation, that I was endeavouring in good earnest to acquire a more sociable and childlike character, a more attractive and sprightly manner – something lighter, franker, more natural, as it were – she really must exclude me from privileges intended only for contented, happy, little children."

"What does Bessie say, I have done?" I asked.

Folds of scarlet drapery shut in my view to the right hand; to the left were the clear panes of glass, protecting, but not separating me from the drear November day. At intervals, while turning over the leaves of my book, I studied the aspects of that winter afternoon. Afar, it offered a pale blank of mist and cloud; near, a scene of wet lawn and storm-beat shrub, with ceaseless rain sweeping away wildly before a long and lamentable blast.

I returned to my book – Bewick’s “History of British Birds”: the letterpress there of it cared little for, generally speaking; and yet there were certain picture pages that, child as I was, I could not pass quite as a blank. Each picture told a story; mysterious often to my undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings, yet ever profoundly interesting: as interesting as the tales Bessie sometimes narrated on winter evenings, when she chanced to be in good humour; and when, having brought her ironing-table to the nursery-hearth, she allowed us to sit about it, and fed our eager attention with passages of love and adventure taken from old fairy tales and older ballads; or (as at a later period I discovered) from the pages of “Pamela”, and “Henry, Earl of Moreland”. With Bewick on my knee, I was then happy: happy at least in my way.

### *(Part II)*

Merry days were these at Thornfield Hall; and busy days too: how different from the first three months of stillness, monotony, and solitude I had passed beneath its roof! The kitchen, the butter’s pantry, the servant’s hall, the entrance hall, were equally alive; and the saloons were only left void and still when the blue sky and halcyon sunshine of the genial spring weather called their occupants out into the grounds. Even when the weather was broken, and continuous rain set in for some days, no damp seemed cast over enjoyment: indoor amusements only became more lively and varied, in consequence of the stop put to outdoor gaiety.

Meantime, while I thought only of my master and Miss Ingram – saw only them, heard only their discourse, and considered only their movements of importance – the rest of the party were occupied with their own separate interests and pleasures. Mr. Rochester and – because closely connected with him – Miss Ingram were the life and the soul of the party. If he was absent from the room an hour, a perceptible dullness seemed to steal over the spirits of his guests; his re-entrance was sure to give a fresh impulse to the vivacity of conversation.

The want of his animating influence appeared to be peculiarly felt one day that he had been summoned to Millcote on business, and was not likely to return till late. The afternoon was wet: a walk the party had proposed to take to see a gipsy camp, lately pitched on a common beyond Hay, was consequently deferred. It was verging on dusk, and the clock had already chimed evening, when the house-dresser for dinner, – poor little Adele, – had looked up in

near the window, that I was obliged to bend back almost to the breaking of my spine: in her eagerness she did not observe me at first, but when she did, she curled her lip and moved to another casement.

The post-chaise stopped; the driver rang the door-bell, and a gentleman alighted. But it was not Mr. Rochester; it was a tall, fashionable-looking man, a stranger. Some parleying was audible in the hall, and soon the newcomer entered. He bowed to Lady Ingram, as deeming her the eldest present. "It appears I come at an inopportune time, Madam," said he, "when my friend, Mr. Rochester, is from home; but I arrive from a long journey, and I think I may presume so far on old and intimate acquaintance as to install myself here till he returns." His manner was polite; his accent, in speaking, struck me as being somewhat unusual – not precisely foreign, but still not altogether English; his age might be about Mr. Rochester's – between thirty and forty; his complexion was singularly sallow: otherwise he was a fine-looking man, at first sight especially.

The sound of the dressing-bell dispersed the party. It was not till after dinner that I saw him again; he then seemed quite at his ease. But I liked his physiognomy even less than before: it struck me as being at the same time unsettled and inanimate. His eye wandered, and had no meaning in it's wandering: this gave him an odd look, such as I never remembered to have seen. He had spoken of Mr. Rochester as an old friend. A curious friendship theirs must have been: a pointed illustration, indeed, of the old adage that "extremes meet."

<sup>1</sup> – «Вот возвращается Мистер Рочестер!» (фр.)  
(*Part III*)

Diana and Mary were soon to leave Moor House and return to the far different life and scene which awaited them, as governess in a large, fashionable south-of-England city. Mr. St. John had said nothing to me yet about the employment he had promised to find for me: yet it became urgent that I should have a vocation of some kind. One morning, being left alone with him a few minutes in the parlour, I ventured to approach the window-recess which his table, chair and desk concentrated as a kind of study; and I was going to speak, though not very well knowing in what words to make my inquiry.

Looking up as I drew near – "You have a question to ask me?" he said.

"Yes. I wish to know whether you have heard of any service I can offer myself to undertake?"

"I found or devised something for you three weeks ago; but as you seemed both useful and happy here – as my sisters had evidently become attached you and you society gave them unusual pleasure – I deemed it inexpedient to break in your mutual comfort till

you, I have nothing eligible or profitable to suggest. And since I am myself poor and obscure, I can offer you but a service of poverty and obscurity. You may even think it degradating – for I see now your habits have been what the world calls refined and your society has at least been among the educated; but I consider that no service degrades which can better our race.”

“Do explain,” I urged, when he hatted.

“I will; and you shall hear how poor the proposal is – how trivial, how cramping. Morton, when I came to it two years ago, had no school: the children of the poor were excluded from every hope of progress. I established one for boys; I mean now to open a second for girls. I have hired a building for the purpose, with a cottage of two rooms attached to it for the mistress’s house. Her salary will be thirty pounds a year: her house is already furnished, very simply, but sufficiently, by a kindness of a lady, Miss Oliver, the only daughter of the rich man in my parish – Mr. Oliver, the proprietor of a needle-factory and ironfoundry in the valley. The same lady pays for education and clothing of an orphan from the workhouse, on condition that she shall aid the mistress in such menial offices connected with her own house and the school as her occupation of teaching will prevent her having time to discharge in person. Will you be this mistress?”

“I thank you for the proposal, Mr. Rivers, and accept it with all my heart.”

He now smiled: and not a bitter or a sad smile, but one well pleased and deeply gratified. “And I leave Europe for the East.”

I started the labours of the village-school as actively and faithfully as I could. It was trully hard work at first. Some time passed before, with all my efforts, I could understand my scholars and their nature. There was a difference amongst them as amongst the educated; and when I got to know them, and they me, this difference rapidly developed itself. I began personnaly like some of the best girls; and they liked me.