

# Charlotte Brontë

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**Charlotte Brontë**



Charlotte Brontë by George Richmond, 1850

**Pseudonym:** Currer Bell

**Born:** April 21, 1816  
Thornton, Yorkshire, England

**Died:** March 31, 1855

**Occupation:** Governess, Novelist, Poet

**Genres:** Novel

**Charlotte Brontë** (IPA: [ˈbrʌnti/]) (April 21, 1816 – March 31, 1855) was an English novelist and the eldest of the three Brontë sisters whose novels have become enduring classics of English literature.

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## Life

Charlotte Brontë was born at Thornton, in Yorkshire, England, the third of six children, to Patrick Brontë (formerly "Patrick Brunty"), an Irish Anglican clergyman, and his wife, Maria Branwell. In April 1820 the family moved to Haworth, where Patrick had been appointed Perpetual Curate. Maria Branwell Brontë died of cancer on 15 September 1821, leaving five

daughters and a son to the care of her sister Elizabeth Branwell. In August 1824, Charlotte was sent with three of her sisters, Emily, Maria, and Elizabeth, to the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge in Lancashire (which she would describe as Lowood School in *Jane Eyre*). Its poor conditions, Charlotte maintained, permanently affected her health and physical development, and hastened the deaths of her two elder sisters, Maria (born 1815) and Elizabeth (born 1814), who died of tuberculosis in 1825 soon after they were removed from the school.

At home in Haworth Parsonage, Charlotte and the other surviving children — Branwell, Emily, and Anne — began chronicling the lives and struggles of the inhabitants of their imaginary kingdoms. Charlotte and Branwell wrote stories about their country — Angria — and Emily and Anne wrote articles and poems about theirs — Gondal. The sagas were elaborate and convoluted (and still exist in part manuscripts) and provided them with an obsessive interest in childhood and early adolescence, which prepared them for their literary vocations in adulthood.

Charlotte continued her education at Roe Head school in Mirfield from 1831 to 1832, where she

met her lifelong friends and correspondents, Ellen Nussey and Mary Taylor. During this period (1833) she wrote her novella *The Green Dwarf* under the name of Wellesley. Charlotte returned as a teacher from 1835 to 1838. In 1839 she took up the first of many positions as governess to various families in Yorkshire, a career she pursued until 1841. In 1842 she and Emily travelled to Brussels to enroll in a pensionnat run by Constantin Heger (1809–1896) and his wife Claire Zoé Parent Heger (1804–1890). In return for board and tuition, Charlotte taught English and Emily taught music. Their time at the pensionnat was cut short when Elizabeth Branwell, their aunt who joined the family after the death of their mother to look after the children, died of internal obstruction in October 1842. Charlotte returned alone to Brussels in January 1843 to take up a teaching post at the pensionnat. Her second stay at the pensionnat was not a happy one; she became lonely, homesick, and deeply attached to Constantin Heger. She finally returned to Haworth in January 1844 and later used her time at the pensionnat as the inspiration for some of *The Professor* and *Villette*.

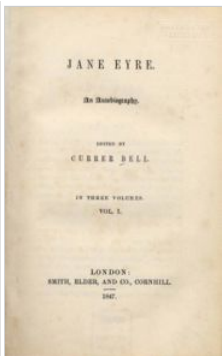
In May 1846, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne published a joint collection of poetry under the assumed names of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell.

Although the book failed to attract interest (only two copies were sold) the sisters decided to continue writing for publication and began work on their first novels. Charlotte continued to use the name 'Currer Bell' when she published her first two novels. Of this, Brontë later wrote:

"Averse to personal publicity, we veiled our own names under those of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell; the ambiguous choice being dictated by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because--without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called 'feminine'--we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery, which is not true praise." [1]

Her novels were deemed coarse by the critics. Much speculation took place as to who Currer Bell really was, and whether Bell was a man or a woman.

Charlotte's brother, Branwell, the only son of the family, died of chronic bronchitis and marasmus exacerbated by heavy drinking, in September 1848, although Charlotte believed his death was due to tuberculosis. Emily and Anne both died of pulmonary tuberculosis in December 1848 and May 1849, respectively.



Cover page of the first edition of *Jane Eyre*

Charlotte and her father were now left alone. In view of the enormous success of *Jane Eyre*, she was persuaded by her publisher to visit London occasionally, where she revealed her true



Photograph of Charlotte  
Brontë, 1854

identity and began to move in a more exalted social circle, becoming friends with Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Gaskell, William Makepeace Thackeray and G. H. Lewes.

However, she never left Haworth for more than a few weeks at a time as she did not want to leave her aging

father's side.

In June 1854, Charlotte married Arthur Bell Nicholls, her father's curate. Her death certificate gives the cause of death as phthisis (tuberculosis), but there is a school of thought that suggests she may have died from her excessive vomiting caused by severe morning sickness in the early stages of pregnancy. There is also evidence to suggest that Charlotte died from typhus she may have caught from Tabitha Ackroyd, the Brontë household's oldest servant, who died shortly before her.

Charlotte was interred in the family vault in The Church of St. Michael and All Angels, Haworth, West Yorkshire, England.

The posthumous biography of Charlotte Brontë by her fellow novelist Elizabeth Gaskell, is a masterpiece of literature, written by one who knew her well, and is still the standard source on her life. However, though quite frank in places, Gaskell suppressed details of Charlotte's love for Heger, a married man, as being too much of an affront to contemporary mores and as a possible source of distress to Charlotte's still-living friends, father and husband (Lane 1953 178-183).

## Novels

- *Jane Eyre*, published 1847
- *Shirley*, published 1849
- *Villette*, published 1853
- *The Professor*, written before *Jane Eyre* and rejected by many publishing houses, was published posthumously in 1857

## Poems

- *from Retrospection written in 1835*



## References

- *This article incorporates public domain text from: Cousin, John William (1910). A Short Biographical Dictionary of English Literature. London, J.M. Dent & sons; New York, E.P. Dutton.*
  - Margaret Lane (1953) *The Bronte Story: a reconsideration of Mrs Gaskell's Life of Charlotte Bronte.*
1. ^ "BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE OF ELLIS AND ACTON BELL", from the preface to the 1910 edition of Wuthering Heights.

## Further reading

- *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, 3 volumes edited by Margaret Smith
- *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Elizabeth Gaskell
- *Charlotte Brontë*, Winifred Gerin
- *Charlotte Brontë: a passionate life*, Lyndal Gordon
- *The Literary Protégées of the Lake Poets*, Dennis Low (Chapter 1 contains a revisionist contextualization of Robert Southey's

infamous letter to Charlotte Brontë)

- *Charlotte Brontë: Unquiet Soul*, Margot Peters
- *In the Footsteps of the Brontës*, Ellis Chadwick
- *Charlotte Brontë*, Rebecca Fraser
- *The Brontës*, Juliet Barker
- *Charlotte Brontë and her Dearest Nell*, Barbara Whitehead
- *The Brontë Myth*, Lucasta Miller
- *A Life in Letters*, selected by Juliet Barker
- *Charlotte Brontë and her Family*, Rebecca Fraser
- *The Oxford Reader's Companion to the Brontës*, Christine Alexander & Margaret Smith
- *A Brontë Family Chronology*, Edward Chitham

## External links

- Website of the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth, Yorkshire
- Online editions of Charlotte Brontë's works
- Works by Charlotte Brontë at Project Gutenberg
- Charlotte Brontë — Drawing by George Richmond (National Portrait Gallery)
- Charlotte Brontë and Her Circle, by Clement

- K. Shorter, from Project Gutenberg
- Charlotte Brontë at the Internet Book List
- Selected Poems of Charlotte Brontë at Inspired Poetry
- Villette MP3 Audiobook

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