

MASTERPIECE

Charlotte Brontë: Biography

The lives of the Brontë family—brilliant, eccentric, prolific, tragic—have long fascinated the public. Charlotte, born on April 21, 1816, was the third daughter of the Reverend Patrick Brontë and his wife Maria. Charlotte and her older sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, were joined the following year by a brother, Branwell, and by sisters Emily and Anne in 1818 and 1820, respectively.



In 1820, when Patrick accepted a position in Haworth, Yorkshire, the family moved to the parsonage there—a site that now attracts thousands of visitors. Charlotte’s mother died of cancer the following year, and her aunt, Elizabeth Branwell, moved in with the family. When Charlotte was 8, she joined her older sisters at the Clergy Daughters’ School at Cowan Bridge, Lancashire—the model for the dreadful Lowood School in *Jane Eyre*. As a result of the poor living conditions, Charlotte’s beloved oldest sister, Maria, contracted tuberculosis and died at age 11. (The death of the saintly Helen Burns in *Jane Eyre* is thought to be modeled after Maria’s death.) Elizabeth, also suffering from tuberculosis, died soon afterwards.

Charlotte, heartbroken, returned home. Patrick Brontë took up the education of his remaining children. Although he was strict, Mr. Brontë encouraged his children’s creativity and imagination. Charlotte read voraciously, learned to draw, and began to write. When their father brought home a box of wooden soldiers for Branwell, the soldiers became characters in stories the four siblings invented. The children wrote in great detail—on tiny, homemade books made from scraps of paper—about an imaginary world that they called the Kingdom of Angria.

At age 15, Charlotte went to boarding school again and eventually became a teacher herself, first to her sisters at home, and then at the Roe Head School when she was 19. She briefly took a position as a governess, but disliked it intensely and didn’t stay long. A second try at being a governess lasted less than a year. In 1842, Charlotte and Emily went to Brussels to study, but when their Aunt Elizabeth died, the girls returned home. After another brief trip abroad, Charlotte returned to Haworth for good.

When Charlotte was nearly 30, she decided to publish a selection of the poems written by herself, Emily, and Anne under the pseudonyms of “Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell.” Although only two copies of the book, published in 1846, were sold, Charlotte and her sisters were undeterred. They began their next venture, which Charlotte described to their publisher as “three distinct and unconnected tales” —Emily’s *Wuthering Heights*, Anne’s *Agnes Grey*, and Charlotte’s first novel, *The Professor*. When Charlotte’s first novel was rejected, she quickly wrote another, and

in 1847, *Jane Eyre* was published. It was an immediate success. The first printing sold out within three months, and the novel has never been out of print since.

Charlotte's achievements were soon overshadowed by further tragedy. In 1848, Branwell, who had squandered his artistic talents and failed to find employment, succumbed to tuberculosis, alcoholism, and drug addiction at the age of 31. Emily died three months later, also of tuberculosis, and Anne lost her battle with the same disease the following year.

Although she was intensely lonely without her siblings, Charlotte continued to write, becoming more famous and sought after, especially when the real identity of "Currer Bell" was revealed. Her world widened in 1849, when she traveled to London to tour the city, attend the theatre, and hear a lecture by novelist William Makepeace Thackeray, to whom she dedicated the second edition of *Jane Eyre*.

Back at Haworth, Arthur Bell Nicholls, the curate (assistant) and a frequent visitor to the Brontë home, declared his feelings for Charlotte and proposed marriage. Mr. Brontë objected, and Charlotte declined. Gradually, Mr. Brontë's opposition diminished, and Charlotte and Arthur married in June 1854. Their marriage was happy but brief. Charlotte, pregnant and ill with what was probably tuberculosis (or perhaps typhus or pneumonia), died on March 31, 1855 at age 38.

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