UNIT 11: EMILY AND CHARLOTTE BRONTË: LIFE AND WORKS

UNIT STRUCTURE:

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11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- trace the life and works of Emily Brontë, Charlotte Brontë and Anne Brontë in some detail
- describe the significance of the Brontë sisters in the context of English literature
- discuss the critical receptions of the Brontë sisters and their works in the field of literature

11.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of the Block. This unit shall introduce you to the Brontë sisters whose literary contributions today have become important areas of research. You will note that Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855) was the eldest among the three sisters. She had been a novelist and poet, and her novels have become classics in the field of English Literature. She is best known for her novel *Jane Eyre* which she wrote under the pen name Currer Bell. Emily (1818-1848) was also a novelist and poet. She is best known for her only novel, *Wuthering Heights.* She

wrote under the pen name Ellis Bell. Anne Brontë (1820–1849) was the youngest of the three sisters. She published a volume of poetry with her two sisters under the title Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell, and two novels namely *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. This unit shall deal with the life and works of the Brontë sisters in some details, and it is hoped that the information and ideas that you will get in this unit, shall help you to discuss the novels like *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* in the subsequent units.

11.3 CHARLOTTE BRONTË: THE NOVELIST

The eldest of the famous Brontë sisters, Charlotte was born in Thornton, Yorkshire in 1816, to Maria and Patrick Brontë. The family moved from Thornton to Haworth when Patrick was appointed a curate to a church at Haworth Yorkshire in 1820 until his death in 1861. After the death of their mother in 1821, the charge of taking care of the children devolved on to their aunt Elizabeth Branwell. In 1824, Charlotte was sent to Clergy Daughter's School at Cowan Bridge in Lancashire, along with three of her sisters Emily, Maria and Elizabeth. Starvation and lack of hygiene made life at Cowan Bridge difficult for all of them. Charlotte's physical health began to deteriorate when two of her sisters died. Following this tragic death of two of his daughters, Patrick Brontë brought back his daughters to Haworth parsonage. The children Charlotte, Emily, Anne and Barnwell got together, and imaginatively created a world of their own and started their apprenticeship as writers in the form of articles, poems and stories. We must understand that though Charlotte led a more or less secluded life, this collaborative exercise of the siblings in imaginative and creative engagement had a strong bearing on her later literary career.

You should note that before turning to fiction, the Brontë sisters wrote poems. Like her contemporary Elizabeth Barett Browning, Charlotte experimented with the form of long narrative poems and dramatic monologue, both characterise Victorian poetry. She decided later to abandon poetry in favour of the most popular genre of the period the novel. It is important to note that this shift in her mode of writing indicated an overall shift in the literary taste in 1830s and 1840s. The

Brontë sisters lived in the gloomy landscape of the Northern moors and shared a life of fantasy and retreat from the ordinary world. However, through journals and newspapers, they also got access to the contemporary political and ideological debates neither were they aloof from the wind of European Romanticism. On the Brontë sisters' imaginative engagements, Richards Church writes in *The Growth of the English Novel*:

"The children set up worlds of their own, Charlotte and her brother Branwell (soon to die of drink and boredom) inventing one called *Angria*, a pure fairyland; the other inhabited by the younger sisters Emily and Anne, a more grim and moral estate called *Gondal*. All of them wrote copiously of adventures in those imaginary countries…there were no other outlets for the girls."

Charlotte had her education at Row Head too, and from 1839 to 1841, she had found engagements as Governess in many houses. In 1842, she and Emily went to Brussels and enrolled in a boarding school. During this time, Charlotte, Emily and Anne brought out a collaborative poetry collection under the pen name of Cureer, Ellis and Acton Bell. In the mean time, Aunt Elizabeth Branwell died, compelling them to come back to Haworth. Charlotte, however, made a second visit to Brussels, but eventually a lonely and homesick Charlotte made a final comeback in 1844. In the mean time, their only brother died, who was a suspected opium eater. It is, thus, important to note that a tragic undercurrent characterised the course of Charlotte's private and familial life; death took away her mother, aunt and her siblings (we shall in fact see later how death becomes a theme in the novel *Jane Eyre*). So, the writer's experience of the ravages of death is partly responsible for lending an air of loss and melancholy to the novel. The first published novel by Charlotte, *Jane Eyre*, got success and it eventually made her reveal her identity. She became close to a high social circle and became friends with writers like Harriet Hartineer, Elizabeth Gaskell, W. M. Thackeray and G. H. Lewes.

Charlotte married Arthur Bell Nicholls, her father's curate in 1854. Soon after marriage, her health declined rapidly and in 1855, at the age of 38, she breathed her last.

The seclusion of the Haworth parsonage had a strong bearing on the works of Charlotte Brontë. Not only Charlotte, this isolated situation of their home had a potent influence on the creative endeavours of all the Brontë sisters. They were, however, not detached from the contemporary social and political atmosphere. They had a shared life in Yorkshire parsonage, and were close observant of the political and ideological debate that reached them through the contemporary journals. In their early stage, the sisters evolved an elaborate fiction about the fantasy kingdoms of Angria and Gondal. That kind of Gothicism and Romanticism, however, did not remain an exclusive trait of their work because as Andrew Sanders states, "in their adult fiction obvious escapism is diminished in the face of an oppressive and isolating present."

During the Victorian period, the novel emerged as a dominant literary form. People with diverse sensibilities turned to novel writing. Still, it was the question of man in society and the attending moral issues in a particular social context that became a continuous preoccupation of most of the writers. This 'social' orientation of Victorian novel spared some writers who sought to give vent to personal emotions, and take shelter in the realm of the private. Charlotte, along with her sisters, too had the inclination for private emotions. She wrote her first novel *The Professor* in 1846. William Crimsworth, the protagonist of the novel, is an orphan; he leaves England to seek his fortune in Brussels. He falls in love with a puppet teacher in Brussels and eventually marries her. You will note that the manuscript was rejected six times by publishers and was posthumously published by the firm Smith, Elder and Co. in 1857. This novel is based upon her experience as a language student as well as a teacher at Brussels. The basic objection to the novel was with regard to the incidents and its failure to appeal to the readers.

Jane Eyre was published in 1847, under the pen name Cureer Bell and it achieved immediate success. Apart from the social issues it deals with, the narrative by itself was fascinating with its remarkable power to provoke and surprise. The writer's own passion, dreams, frustration are all imaginatively transmuted into fictional incidents, but the novel obviously transcends the autobiographical into a kind of fictional wish-fulfilment. The narrative is characterised by a sustained emotional temperament as well as its many moments of revelation. *Shirley* (1849)

is a "Condition of England Novel" set at the time of Napoleonic wars and is concerned with labour relations. In the novel, Robert Gerard Moore is a mill owner and he introduces a labour-saving machinery in the mill. The labourers turn against him and attempt to destroy the mill and to take his life. In order to raise funds, Robert proposes to Shirley Keeldar, an heiress, but she refuses, and marries his brother, Louis. One notable aspect of the story is its portrayal of a distinctive woman character. The character of Shirley Keeldar was affirmed by Elizabeth Gaskell as a representation of Emily Brontë. The novel raises question of woman and how she is confined to limited opportunity.

The feverish note of *Jane Eyre* is heard in *Villette*. Unlike in *Shirley*, it avoids political backdrop, but marks a return to emotional life. Charlotte's experiences at Brussels formed the materials for *The Professor*, but after the novel's failure, the same materials were now reworked into *Villette*. Here the narrator Lucy Snowe loses her family and the means of financial support; she leaves for Villette and finds employment with Mme Beck as a governess and then as a teacher in the latter's school. Among the vain and frivolous students, Lucy in turn succeeds in establishing her authority. She has a tempestuous relationship with M. Paul Emmanuel, Mme Beck's cousin. Ultimately, he establishes her in a school before leaving for West Indies. The novel has received critical acclaim as it explores the theme of isolation, repression, gender roles and cross-cultural conflict. However, not all the works of Charlotte Brontë might be of the same literary merit, as the critics have upheld *Jane Eyre* as her best fiction. Nevertheless, by going through all of them, one will find certain common preoccupations—the question of woman, gender relation, search for happiness, and the portrayal of the writer's own private experiences.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Comment on the literary background of the Brontë sisters.

Q 2: Why did the Brontë sisters adopt pseudonyms?

Q 3: How would you justify the presence of Gothicism and Romanticism in the works of the Brontë sisters?

Q 4: What were the causes behind the popularity of *Jane Eyre*?

11.4 EMILY BRONTË: THE NOVELIST

Emily Brontë was born on 30th July 1818 in Thornton, a village near Bradford in Yorkshire. As mentioned in the previous section, she was the second among the Brontë sisters. In April 1820, their family moved to a little parish at Haworth to the Northwest of Thornton where Patrick Brontë, their father was given a perpetual curacy. This place in the remote moorlands was to be Emily's home for the rest of her life.

In September 1821, her mother died and her aunt Elizabeth Branwell came over to look after the family. The Brontë girls were initially educated at home by their aunt and later the two elder ones were sent away to Crofton Hall near Wakefield. Then, in 1824, they were sent to the School for Daughters of Poorer Clergymen at Cowan Bridge near Turnstall. The school was a bad experience as the students were neglected if not ill-treated. So much so that the very next year saw the elder Brontë girls come home to die and Charlotte and Emily leave the school for good. Their pathetic experience there has been immortalised in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre,* which also gives us, like Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, a glimpse of the terrible conditions prevailing in some schools of England during the first half of the 19th century. The three sisters and Branwell were then left to lead a lonely life in Haworth dominated by their eccentric father. Aside from the village being in the remote wilderness of Yorkshire, the Brontë family also had an isolated position in society. They belonged neither to the landed gentry nor to the common village folk.

Both Emily and Anne were so engrossed in the world of their making that they did not abandon it with age. Their creative imagination blossomed within its ambit and this resulted in the *Gondal Stories and Poems*. None of the prose is extant but the Gondal Poems gave us an idea of the powerful imaginative faculty of the Brontë sisters. Though the stories are not based on the real-life activities of the girls, the features of the Yorkshire country side where they lived are reflected in the Gondal terrain. The wildness of the moors together with the serene beauty of the hills is also the recurring theme of *Wuthering Heights*. In May 1846, *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell* was published under the Brontës' masculine pseudonyms mainly through the initiative of Charlotte Brontë.

Emily and Anne contributed twenty-one poems each and Charlotte twenty. The book, especially Emily's poems, received good reviews but did not sell well.

In December 1847, *Wuthering Heights* was published, again under Emily's pseudonym Ellis Bell, and Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* under the name of Acton Bell. The three sisters believed, perhaps rightly, that their books would receive scathing reviews if these were known to be written by women. There was wide speculation in English literary circles as to who these mysterious Bell brothers could be. The majority of the readers were also horrified by the characters of Heathcliff and Catherine whose lack of morals and use of profane language offended their Victorian sensibilities. They were repelled by and skeptical of the sadistic "monster" Heathcliff. Thus, Emily's one and only work of fiction was torn apart by critics during her lifetime. It survived initially because of the attempts of her more famous sister to explain the novel to a hostile reading public. Charlotte Brontë's *Biographical Notice* of Ellis and Acton Bell and Editor's Preface to the 1850 edition of *Wuthering Heights* written after Emily's death went a long way towards softening the perception of fierceness and nihilism that critics thought they detected in the author. In September 1848, Branwell who, in addition to his heavy drinking had also become addicted to opium, died suddenly. Emily had looked after him and had continued to hope for his recovery. At his funeral she caught a cold, which was to prove fatal. She refused to see a doctor and accept medication. Three months later she died at the age of thirty, to be followed in another few months by Anne. Charlotte lived for some more years, had a short married life and died in 1855. Their eccentric, violent, near-blind father survived them all.

Readers and critics still feel themselves bewildered to think of the literary significance of a novel like *Wuthering Heights.* It is as far removed from the worlds of Dickens, Thackeray, and Mrs. Gaskell as the lonely windswept moors from crowded bustling London. However, some critics point out that the works of the women novelists, Elizabeth Gaskell, the Brontë sisters and George Eliot have some traits in common. These can be cited as an intimate portrayal of English life and an increasing capacity to delve into moral and emotional nuances. In their hands the novel

acquires the power and artistry of poetry, thus eliciting in the reader a total involvement as in a poetic drama. This is true of the *Mill on the Floss* as of the *Wuthering Heights*. These writers also succeed in portraying life in an England of various regions, social strata and times.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Point out the significance of the Gondal world?

Q 6: What kind of family life did Emily Brontë have?

Q 7: How would you like to judge the literary worth of *Wuthering Heights*?

11.5 ANNE BRONTË: THE NOVELIST

Like her elder sisters, Anne Brontë was educated largely at home, where, as the youngest of the motherless family, she may have fallen under the Wesleyan influence of her Aunt Branwell, who is thought to have encouraged her tendency to religious melancholy. As a child, she was particularly close to Emily; and as you have read in the previous section, together they invented the imaginary world of Gondal, the setting of many of their poems. Anne accompanied Charlotte to Roe Head in 1836-7, and became governess to the Ingham family at Blake Hall in 1839; from 1840 to 1845, she was governess to the Robinson family at Thorp Green Hall, near York. Her brother Branwell joined her there as tutor in 1843, and became disastrously involved with Mrs Robinson. Anne's recollections of her experiences with the over-indulged young children and the worldly older children of these two households are vividly portrayed in *Agnes Grey* (1847). The novel appeared under the pseudonym Acton Bell, like in case of her poems, published in 1846 with those of her sisters. Her poems, which show the influence of Cowper and Wesley, explore religious doubt and confront Calvinist despair: among the most moving are 'To Cowper', 'My God (oh let me call thee mine)' and a Gondal lyric, 'Song: We know where deepest lies the snow'. Her second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), portrays in Arthur Huntingdon a violent, infantile, but sexually attractive drunkard clearly to some extent drawn from Branwell; Charlotte, in her 'Biographical Notice'

(1850), felt obliged to comment that 'the choice of subject was an entire mistake', and insists that her sister's nature was 'naturally sensitive, reserved and dejected'. The novel may be read as a scathing indictment of sexual double standards enshrined in marriage law and the educational system.

Anne died at Scarborough, where she was buried.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: Point out the autobiographical elements in the novel *Wuthering Heights*.

Q 9: What do you understand by Social Problem novel? Can you read *Jane Eyre* as a social problem novel?

11.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF THE BRONTË SISTERS [Adapted from Margaret Drabble]

In her lifetime, Charlotte was the most admired of the Brontë sisters, although she was criticised on the grounds of alleged 'grossness' and emotionalism, considered particularly unbecoming in a clergyman's daughter: Matthew Arnold wrote in a letter (1853) that her mind contained 'nothing but hunger, rebellion and rage', and H. Martineau offended her by claiming that *Villette* dealt excessively with 'the need of being loved', and was passionately anti-Catholic. More widespread, however, was praise for her depth of feeling and her courageous realism, and her works continue to hold high popularity and critical esteem. The standard biographies are E. Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), and W. Gérin, *Charlotte Brontë: The Evolution of Genius* (1967).

Unlike Charlotte, Emily had no close friends, wrote few letters, and had few but strong loyalties; the vein of violence (exemplified in the story of her subduing the dog Keeper with her bare hands), of stoicism, and of mysticism in her personality have given rise to many legends but few certainties. She is now established as one of the most original poets of the century, remembered for her lyrics (e.g. 'The night is darkening round me'), for her passionate invocations from the world of Gondal ('Remembrance', 'he Prisoner'), and her apparently more personal visionary moments ('No coward soul is mine').

Wuthering Heights, which was at first regarded by many as excessively morbid and violent, was gradually reassessed, and by 1899 Mrs H. Ward was praising Emily's masterly fusion of romance and realism at the expense of Charlotte's shrill didacticism. The 20th century, produced a great deal of critical and biographical commentary: C. P. Sanger analysed her careful plotting in *The Structure of Wuthering Heights* (1926): Frank Kermode proposed a variety of readings in *The Classic* (1975): Terry Eagleton proposed a Marxist reading in *Myths of Power* (1975); and J. Hillis Miller explored the complex narrative structure of *Wuthering Heights* in *Fiction and Repetition* (1982).



11.7 LET US SUM UP

In this introductory unit, you have read about the Brontë sisters and their works. Charlotte Brontë was the eldest of the three sisters. She had been a novelist and poet and is best known for her novel *Jane Eyre.* Emily Brontë was also a novelist and poet. She is famous for her only novel *Wuthering Heights.* Anne Brontë was the youngest of the sisters. She also wrote two novels namely *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. You have learnt that all of them wrote under masculine pseudonyms, as publishing by a woman in their times was a very difficult issue.



11.8 FURTHER READING

Allen, Walter (1958). *The English Novel: A Short Critical History*. Penguin Books.

Entry on the Brontë sisters in Drabble, Margaret. (ed). (2000). *The Oxford Companion to English Literature.* (6th edition). OUP.

Ford, Boris (ed.) (1982). *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature: Vol. 6 From Dickens to Hardy.* Great Britain: Penguin Books.

Sanders, Andrew. (2004). *The Short Oxford History of English Literature.* London: OUP.

11.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: Before turning to fiction, the Brontë sisters wrote poems… …but Charlotte decided to write novels the most popular genre of the period… …the gloomy landscape of the northern moors where she lived enabled them to imaginatively retreat from the ordinary world… …again through journals and newspapers, they got access to the contemporary political and ideological debates, as well as European Romanticism… …Subsequently, they produced Gondal stories and poems.

Ans to Q No 2: It was done to avoid a strong gender prejudice prevalent during that time… …since writing was supposedly a male enterprise a male pseudonym would have ensured acceptability of the work among the literary circles… …Emily Brontë adopted the pseudonym Ellis Bell, Anne Brontë Acton Bell and Charlotte Brontë Currer Bell… …It was because they believed that their books would receive scathing reviews if these were known to be written not by men.

Ans to Q No 3: The seclusion of the Haworth parsonage had a strong bearing on the works of Charlotte Brontë sisters… …despite that, they were not detached from the contemporary social and political atmosphere… …they evolved in their early stage an elaborate fiction about the fantasy kingdoms of Angria and Gondal… …however Gothicism and Romanticism of that kind did not remain an exclusive trait in their works.

Ans to Q No 4: Charlotte's own passion, dreams, frustration etc. are all imaginatively transmuted into fictional incidents… … the novel transcends the autobiographical into a kind of fictional wish-fulfilment… …the narrative of the novel is characterised by a sustained emotional temperament as well as its many moments of revelation.

Ans to Q No 5: Emily and Anne Brontë were engrossed in the world of their own making… …for this they imaginatively created the Gondal terrain… …the result was the composition of Gondal Stories and Poems… …however, none of the prose is extant but the Gondal Poems gave us an idea of the powerful imaginative faculty of the Brontë sisters.

Ans to Q No 6: Emily had a very sad family life… …two of her elder sisters died in childhood and the only son Branwell was to waste away his talents and drink himself to death in the prime of youth… …moreover, she had to live a lonely life dominated by their eccentric father.

Ans to Q No 7: *Wuthering Heights* as a novel is far removed from the worlds of Dickens, Thackeray, and Mrs. Gaskell… …however, it seems to have certain points common with the works of Elizabeth Gaskell, the Brontë sisters and George Eliot… …the worth of this novel lies in its intimate portrayal of English life and in its capacity to penetrate deep into the moral and emotional nuances.

Ans to Q No 8: Parallel between Charlotte's real experience as a governess and Jane's… …similarities between Cowan Bridge and Lowood… …ravages of death in the author's private life and death as a theme in the novel.

Ans to Q No 4: It means novels focusing the social questions… …it is a fixed historical category… …although it discusses social issues, *Jane Eyre* is not a typical social problem novel… …it is about an isolated individual whose course of life does not reflect the ebb and flow of social and communal life.



11.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: What are the major preoccupations of the Brontë sisters as novelists? Discuss with reference to some of the important works.

Q 2: Why was it difficult for the Brontës to publish during their times? Point out the autobiographical elements in the novels of the Brontë sisters.

Q 3: Do you think that the morbid and secluded atmosphere at home in turn contributed to the making of the Brontë sisters' as writers? Illustrate.

Q 4: What according to you is the significance of the Brontë sisters in the context of English fiction? How did they write their fiction against a masculine milieu of the early 19th century? Discuss.

Q 5: Write a note on the condition of the novel in the beginning of the 19th century.

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