

# The Bronte Sisters And The Importance Of Women's Education In The Nineteenth Century

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## Abstract

This article presents a literary analysis of the works of the Bronte sisters and the importance of women's education in the nineteenth century. The popularity of their works is a pointer that the Brontës had helped readers in the nineteenth century to familiarize themselves with the existence of women writers. The Brontës' writing helped to inform evolving social mores regarding women and their growing independence during the period and would resonate with subsequent generations of feminists, as well, as they worked to provide equal educations.

**Key words:** women's education, equal education, Queen's college, literacy

**Introduction.** The Brontës (/ˈbrɒntɪz/) were a family of literary writers in the nineteenth century, born in Thornton village and subsequently associated with the village of Haworth, in the West Riding of Yorkshire, England. Their sisters Charlotte (1816–1855), Emily (1818–1848), and Anne (1820–1849) were great poets and novelists. Similar to most of the contemporary female authors, they published their poems and novels using pen names of male: Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell separately. Their writings were celebrated for their fervor and originality from the moment of their immediate publication. Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* paved the way to fame, while Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and others were adopted as literature of greatness posthumously.

**Methodology.** The first Brontë children of rector Patrick Brontë and his wife Maria were Maria (1814–1825) and Elizabeth (1815–1825), who died early in illness. Charlotte, Emily and Anne then were born in approximately four years. The three sisters and brother, Branwell (1817–1848), born between Charlotte and Emily, were very close to each other. As children, they were taught to use their imaginations first through oral storytelling and play, in a very sophisticated imaginary world, and then through collaborative writing of more complex stories in their imaginary world. Their mother's death and the deaths of two older sisters marked them and influenced their writing, as did their isolated upbringing. They grew up in a Christian family.[1] The Brontë birthplace at Thornton is a shrine and their later home, the Haworth parsonage in Yorkshire, now the Brontë Parsonage Museum, is toured by hundreds of thousands of visitors annually.

**Results.** The history of education for women is a gradual one of centuries of patriarchal rule with numerous female heroes who fought repeatedly for equal education opportunities. The Brontë sisters were nineteenth-century heroines, as they broke convention by becoming writers, a traditionally male vocation in their day. Their education provided them with the authority to write some of the best novels in history, and they are a historical demonstration of the authority of equal education. Their works illumined the progress that was provided for women's education during the nineteenth century, a good progression of education that provided women with greater autonomy. The Bronte sisters were members of a superior-class, prosperous family, and this gave them more education than the women who were from the lower classes in those days. For example, they received a rare education at the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge in 1824. Being daughters of an Anglican clergyman gave them a privilege to a school that had more than the typical education for women on religion and literacy.

**Discussion.** The one who inspired them to love education was their father, Patrick Brontë, who had studied at Cambridge University and overcome poverty.

This instilled his daughters with the dream of independence through education, especially the eldest, Charlotte. She viewed the power of education as a tool for self-liberation in a patriarchal society. In 1849, she demonstrated her support openly by giving commendation for the daughter of WS Williams when she was

admitted to Queen's College. Her statement, 'An education secured is an advantage gained – a priceless advantage. Come what may it is a step towards independency', combined with her attempted founding of a school shows that she was aware of the power of equal education in enfranchising women during the nineteenth century. While her position as a governess and writer was unstable and insecure, it does indicate that the growing diversity of women's education encouraged Charlotte to be self-sufficient. In 1842, the sisters studied in Brussels to improve their French skills. While Emily and Anne did not stay long, Charlotte returned to continue with her studies. Their education sets the stage for future educational equality of post-nineteenth-century Britain and shows it to be a required resource for women to be self-sufficient. The influence of education can be easily seen in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, as her Gothic imagery—such as her account of the moors—is reflective of the early nineteenth-century transition at which point education began to emphasize Gothic teaching and Romanticism. This demonstrates that her education was a significant factor in her emergence as a renowned writer and being part of the canon of nineteenth-century Gothic literature.

Novels such as *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* had sexual imagery that went beyond the presuppositions of male readers and shocked them, as sexuality was a delicate subject for women.

The education of the Brontë sisters and their complex literature reveal that girls' education was rapidly acquiring meaning during the nineteenth century, if at all for girls belonging to better-off classes. The sisters were initially forced to write using the pen names Ellis, Acton and Currer Bell, indicating the sexist attitudes of the time. In particular, it was believed that novels written by women would not sell because they would be considered dull and full of 'flowery' material. Nevertheless, the sisters were still radical, as they employed their privileged education to promote women's issues in their books. Unexpectedly, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* had impacted British society and literary history as the first such case where a novel on women's issues proved to be so popular. The novel makes the male hero, Heathcliff, appear as a dehumanising figure due to his violent and disheveled condition, while the heroine, Catherine, represents the outcome of women's confinement within marriage.

Therefore, Emily's use of veiled feminist elements in the novel sends a powerful social message about women's freedom of expression since Catherine's manipulations are the reason behind her insanity.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* also shares ideals of an independent woman because Jane departs from a suffocating home and lives an independent life irrespective of males' opinions about her. Charlotte uses this character as the prototype of the idealistic figure of the free woman. The proof that nowadays there are so many books on female characters and their freedom helps illustrate that the work of the Brontës was revolutionary and influential. Nowadays, the independence of women is accepted everywhere and socially welcomed due to previous works like those of the Brontë sisters.

Looking back, we can see that the efforts of the Brontë sisters in revolutionizing attitudes towards people opened the door to equal rights to education today. However, with today's heroes such as Malala Yousafzai and Michelle Obama being kept on the agitation pitch regarding education for girls all over the world, it is evident that remnants of nineteenth-century inequality remain rooted in society. To note here is the unchanging quality of women's educational equity in countries such as Afghanistan, Lebanon, India, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Brazil, Pakistan, and Turkey. Therefore, although Brontës are a benchmark for the coequal rights of women's education in Britain, their literature continues to be as relevant today because it makes one realize that in some countries the advancement of education has been stuck since the nineteenth century.

**Conclusion.** There are numerous biographies available on the Brontë family. I've read two: *Weaver of Dreams*, a children's biography by Elfrida Vipont; and *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* by Charlotte's friend Elizabeth Gaskell. Gaskell's work includes many first-hand anecdotes of the Brontës as well as letter and journal excerpts. The Brontë biopic *To Walk Invisible* looks good, and there's an upcoming Emily biopic that was filmed. In addition, the Brontë Parsonage Museum website has a number of helpful articles on the family and their writings.

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