

Charlotte Brontë as a Novelist

Charlotte Brontë (21 April 1816 – 31 March 1855) was an English novelist and poet, the eldest of the three Brontë sisters who survived into adulthood and whose novels became classics of English literature. She enlisted in school at Roe Head in January 1831, aged 14 years. She left the year after to teach her sisters, Emily and Anne, at home, returning in 1835 as a governess. In 1839 she undertook the role as governess for the Sidgwick family but left after a few months to return to Haworth where the sisters opened a school, but failed to attract pupils. Instead, they turned to writing and they each first published in 1846 under the pseudonyms of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. While her first novel, *The Professor*, was rejected by publishers, her second novel, *Jane Eyre*, was published in 1847. The sisters admitted to their Bell pseudonyms in 1848, and by the following year were celebrated in London literary circles. Brontë was the last to die of all her siblings. She became pregnant shortly after her marriage in June 1854 but died on 31 March 1855, almost certainly from hyperemesis gravidarum, a complication of pregnancy which causes excessive nausea and vomiting.

Charlotte's first novel, *The Professor* (published posthumously, 1857), shows her sober reaction from the indulgences of her girlhood. Told in the first person by an English tutor in Brussels, it is based on Charlotte's experiences there, with a reversal of sexes and roles. The necessity of her genius, reinforced by reading her sister Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, modified this restrictive self-discipline, and, though there is plenty of satire and dry, direct phrasing in *Jane Eyre*, its success was the fiery conviction with which it presented a thinking, feeling woman, craving love but able to renounce it at the call of impassioned self-respect and moral conviction.

The book's narrator and main character, *Jane Eyre*, is an orphan and is governess to the ward of Mr. Rochester, the Byronic and enigmatic employer with whom she falls in love. Her love is reciprocated, but on the wedding morning it comes out that Rochester is already married and keeps his mad and depraved wife in the attics of his mansion. Jane leaves him, suffers hardship, and finds work as a village schoolmistress. When Jane learns, however, that Rochester has been maimed and blinded while trying vainly to rescue his wife from the burning house that she herself had set afire, Jane seeks him out and marries him. There are melodramatic naïvetés in the story, and Charlotte's elevated rhetorical passages do not much appeal to modern taste, but she maintains her hold on the reader. The novel, purporting to be an autobiography, is written in the first person, but, except in *Jane Eyre*'s impressions of Lowood, the autobiography is not Charlotte's. Personal experience is fused with suggestions from widely different sources, and the Cinderella theme may well come from Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela*. The action is carefully motivated, and apparently episodic sections, like the return to Gateshead Hall, are seen to be necessary to the full expression of Jane's character and the working out of the threefold moral theme of love, independence, and forgiveness.

In her novel *Shirley*, Charlotte avoided melodrama and coincidences and widened her scope. Setting aside Maria Edgeworth and Sir Walter Scott as national novelists, *Shirley* is the first regional novel in English, full of shrewdly depicted local material—Yorkshire characters, church and chapel, the cloth workers and machine breakers of her father's early manhood, and a sturdy but rather embittered feminism.

In *Villette* Charlotte recurred to the Brussels setting and the first-person narrative, disused in *Shirley*; the characters and incidents are largely variants of the people and life at the Pension Héger. Against that background she set the ardent heart, deprived of its object, contrasted with the woman happily fulfilled in love.

The influence of Charlotte's novels was much more immediate than that of *Wuthering Heights*. Charlotte's combination of romance and satiric realism had been the mode of nearly all the women novelists for a century. Her fruitful innovations were the presentation of a tale through the sensibility of a child or young woman, her lyricism, and the picture of love from a woman's standpoint.

Reference:

Britannica.com