How The Brontë Sisters' Lifestyle Affected Their Famous Writings

"A strange uncivilised little place." (Harman, 2015, p.30) So Charlotte Bronte would make excuse for her home town. To some visitors, it seemed as harsh as Wuthering Heights. It was just Haworth, a rambling town lost on the moor–a violent, brutal, drunken place, free from all restraint, and little unchecked. From this patch of Britain came some of England's most famous novels, the Bronte sisters' trilogy: *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. The books are strange things–tormented, desperate, void of joy, searching for love, unable to attain. Themes are similar with each. Each one speaks of a wild searching for a mate, a passion, a violence, and those rugged English moors. Remember Bertha Rochester smashed on the pavement? Remember Heathcliff trying to knife Isabella and hanging her dog? Remember the dinner party that ended with a little improvised wife abuse? These are all wild, fantastic, and shocking stories, yet penned by three women who grew up in a dark parsonage, with only themselves as company, who somehow managed to jolt the world with their captivating tales.

How did these stories come to be? Something must have influenced those Brontes to inspire them to create such novels. We are all impressionable. What was it in the Bronte's lifestyle that affected the girls' novels? The land about them–the people who taught them–the childhood evenings spent fabricating fantasies–all bled into the Bronte sisters' work, influencing them to influence the world with *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

The very beginning of any influence in their writing can be attributed to the girls' family history and their lives growing up. There were six Bronte children: Maria, Elizabeth, Charlotte, Patrick Branwell, Emily, and Anne. They hadn't always lived in Haworth. Until Charlotte was nearly four, they had all lived, and were born, in Thornton, Yorkshire. Then Patrick Bronte, their father, was given the parsonage in Haworth, so in 1820, just after Anne's birth, they packed up and

went off to Haworth, and there they would stay and eventually die. The children went into the house and established themselves quite contentedly. There was a room that the girls shared, and a big dining room table that the children would gather around frequently.

They weren't the "going-out" type. The Brontes never owned a horse and carriage, and transportation was two legs. "The children had chores to do in the house, and study hours, and were encouraged to go out for walks as frequently as possible (always choosing the direction of the moor rather than the town), but most of the time they were entirely on their own." (Harman, 2015, p.57) The girls especially did not make any friends in the village. People said of them that they were not like other children. They could not relate to their own peers, except to their siblings, and they seemed to have gotten all the socialization they could possibly have wanted from those familial relationships. As they got older, some friendships were made and maintained, yet they were never what one could call "social butterflies".

The girls' schooling also made a strong impression on their writing. In 1824, when Charlotte was eight, and their poor mother had succumbed to cancer, Patrick Bronte thought it a wise move to send his daughters, all except Anne, to Cowan Bridge School, run exclusively for the daughters of clergyman. The man in charge of the school, Mr. William Carus Wilson, would be immortalized forever in the character of *Jane Eyre's* Mr. Brocklehurst. The school conditions were harsh and stark, the food bad, the cold intolerable, all totally unacceptable conditions for young girls, and all completely identical with the Lowood Institution, the school Jane Eyre attends when young.

However, one cannot determine for certain whether Mr. Wilson was quite so sadistic in nature as the infamous Mr. Brocklehurst, as Elizabeth Gaskell seems to imply. "Mr. Wilson himself ordered in the food, and was anxious that it should be of good quality. But the cook, who had much of his confidence, and against whom for a long time no one durst a complaint, was careless, dirty,

and wasteful." (Gaskell & Easson, 2009, p55) I understand, then, according to this bias-free statement by Gaskell, that Wilson wanted plain but decent food, yet the cook was not trustworthy. It is unfortunate, then, that Wilson did nothing about the cook. This can probably be mirrored in the "bread and cheese" passage in *Jane Eyre*, where Mr. Brocklehurst maintains that eating burnt porridge is more likely to get one to heaven whereas bread and cheese will undoubtedly damn the soul.

The heavy impact of loss also left its mark on the Bronte girls and was incorporated into their books. What with the weather, the bad food, and other deplorable conditions, eleven-year-old Maria and ten-year-old Elizabeth fell ill with tuberculosis. Maria, the eldest, was described as quite the saint, intelligent, wise beyond her years, and patient and long suffering. She had been suffering from a prolonged sickness, and her abusive treatment by a horrible teacher, even whilst dying, caps an almost identical description of *Jane Eyre's* ill-fated Helen Burns. She and Elizabeth died. The little sisters could merely stand by and be heart-broken, death and suffering branded too young on their souls. Even after all this, Patrick Bronte did not take Charlotte and Emily home with him. The term was not over and the tuition had been paid before time; he wanted to get his money's worth. He finally realized that the school was not an idyllic situation, and he brought them home.

Back at Haworth, the children shared their family home with their Aunt Elizabeth, who had come to fill their dead mother's shoes. Their education was carried on at home, where they learned needlework and other accomplishments. They were fed a constant diet of solid adult material that their father deemed suitable, and had no children's books to soften their harsh surroundings. It would almost seem laughable to imagine the little serious Bronte's engrossed in Mother Goose when the newspaper and its politics held innumerable delights. What can explain this? Had their characters been different, they would perhaps have wilted under such educational methods. No

indeed. Their strong personalities were rather magnets for their intellectual growth, and anything less than that on which they had been raised would seem to have been truly detrimental. Thus it would seem with geniuses.

Once the sessions of instruction were over, the children were left to themselves. They had no friends but each other, nothing literary for children but those great classics, and though they enjoyed these, they needed something more to vary the hours. For that reason, and later, for the delight of the world, they fabricated and spun stories.

The little wooden toy soldiers Branwell received from his father became sibling property, and were duly christened The Young Men. The children would bend over tiny books, magnifying glass in hand, and pen stories of drama, intrigue, and tension about their little soldiers. From minds trained only by words on a page, their imaginations were limitless; there were no places they could not go. They were isolated and content, like Jane Eyre at Thornfield, Cathy at Wuthering Heights, and Helen at Wildfell Hall.

Aside from their intoxicating world of make-believe, the moors of Yorkshire were wild and beckoning. Perhaps it was Emily who loved them the most. Indeed, she would languish alarmingly when she was away from home. "My sister Emily loved the moors. Flowers brighter than the rose bloomed in the blackest of the heath for her; - out of a sullen hollow in a livid hill-side, her mind could make an Eden. She found in the bleak solitude many and dear delights; and not the least and best-loved was – liberty." (Gaskell & Easson, 2009, p109) Consequently, even Emily's one novel is more of moors than man. Not that the landscape is mentioned oftener, but rather that the man is the moor, wild and unchecked, lost and seeking, torn and soothed.

If Emily's passion for the moors was still stronger than that of her sisters', Charlotte and Anne could not help but incorporate that landscape into their novels. They had grown up on the moors;

how could they escape the scenery, even in their books? So Jane Eyre revels in her walks to town, then wanders hopelessly about the country, seeking asylum from Mr. Rochester, and Helen Huntingdon, reserved and sophisticated, strolls about on moors of her own, which are uniquely tamed in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. All three books reveal a distinct stamp of each sisters' unique character traits, and while Charlotte might write more with melancholy, Anne with more mellowness, and Emily more with aggression, they each take the wild, changing moors, and weave its spell into their books.

When childhood began to slip away, and education began to tug them away from Haworth, the three girls attained more schooling at Roe Head School near Mirfield, Yorkshire, where Charlotte would later return as a teacher. In 1838, Emily went to teach for a time at Law Hill School near Halifax, but she had to return home due to chronic homesickness. Whilst there, however, she met the man who had built the school, and whom one cannot help but identify with her famous anti-hero Heathcliff. This man, a certain Jack Sharp, had a family history starkly like that of Heathcliff's and whose suffered injustices had festered into an intense thirsting for revenge. This is so much like Heathcliff himself that it must have been his inspiration. Also, if this is where his character came from, it is interesting just how much of an affect Mr. Sharp had on Emily for her to write an entire novel about him.

Emily was not like her sisters. She was the least religious of the three and exceedingly quiet, apparently displayed love only towards animals, yet could be very brutal. Elizabeth Gaskell relates a startling tale in her biography of Charlotte Bronte that once Emily was very aggressive towards her dog, Keeper. On this occasion, Keeper had soiled bedsheets with his paws, and when Emily discovered this, she went after him with a vengeance. "Her bare clenched fist struck against his red fierce eyes – she 'punished him' till his eyes were swelled up", after which "the half-blind, stupefied

beast was led to his accustomed lair to have his swollen head fomented and cared for by the very Emily herself." (Gaskell & Easson, 2009, p215) This violent behavior is quite bizarre, but another clarification in just how much Emily put into *Wuthering Heights*. The unchecked brutality in that book is shocking, but considering what Emily herself was, is it really so? I would almost like to think that Heathcliff was really the male version of what Emily herself had wished to be, had she let herself run crazy and not subdued those passionate impulses.

On the opposite side of the spectrum was Anne Bronte. Becoming a governess in 1839, she taught for two different families, both of whom gave her great trouble and subjected her to all sorts of grievances and frustrations. However, with perseverance and determination, Anne won over her charges and became a success. This is obviously the background she drew on for her first novel, *Agnes Grey,* in which the heroine is forced to put up with a good deal.

Anne was also unlike her sisters. She was the most religious of the three and used her religion frequently in her book *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall.* Whereas Charlotte used it diffidently, and Emily almost never, Anne uses it as her heroine's guideline and saving grace. The writer Marion Shaw describes her as a "quiet feminist", steadfast and winsome in her defense of women's rights. Her heroine in *Tenant* maintains maternal guardianship, earns money, and owns property, all radical behaviors in a time when such things when unheard of in women of the day. Yet with this, she lacks the violence and shocking aspects that her older sisters apply to their books.

The Bronte children were largely left to themselves growing up, were mostly ignored by their father, and were made to eat alone with the servants while their adult guardians sought solitude in their rooms. Apart from the hours of instruction they were given a free rein, allowed to read shocking authors such as Byron and Shakespeare, and amuse themselves with their imaginary worlds. Anne, however, was her aunt's favourite niece and even shared a room with her growing up.

Elizabeth Branwell was a staunch Methodist and it is clear that her teachings made a profound impact on Anne as displayed in her second book.

Both her novels have similar themes to her sisters' famous works, redemption and violence, yet they are addressed in very different ways. Unlike *Jane Eyre*, where the hero is reformed, "as happens somewhat miraculously" (Shaw, 2013), Anne Bronte's *Tenant* demonstrates the impossibility of reformation in a character that is already on the path to destruction. On the other point, whereas violence in *Wuthering Heights* is akin to the phrase "such is life", violence in *Tenant* is designed to disturb rather than to shock, for its nature is one of marital abuse rather than loutish men and women reveling in dangerous, threatening lifestyles. Secondly, aggression in *Tenant* is abhorred by the heroine and portrayed in such a way as to leave the reader in no doubt as to its negativity, whilst *Wuthering Heights*, again, considers aggression a matter of course, and never raises any objections on that score.

Another element in the Bronte's family life seems to play into at least one of the girls' novels, and that is the decline and moral slump in their brother Patrick Branwell. He became a die-hard alcoholic, and may even have been addicted to drugs. When he eventually died, the girls were heart-broken, for they had been very close. Anne writes in *Tenant* about the rebel Arthur Huntingdon succumbing to the influence of a life of reckless dissipation and drunkenness under the eye of his estranged wife. With great grief she watches his last days on earth, administering medical and spiritual aid, yet he expires without any apparent redemption. It is all very sad.

A more scandalous theory, suggested by writer Harold McGurdy, is that *Wuthering Heights* was influenced by romantic feelings from Emily towards Branwell. If this theory can be given credence, one can note that the relationship in *Wuthering Heights* between Cathy and Heathcliff begins really as one of siblings, then of course later evolves into an extremely passionate love affair.

However, while it is true that Emily's family was her social sphere, with Branwell probably her closest male acquaintance, it does not necessarily follow that Emily loved him as more than a brother.

Continuing on in the pattern of channeled love interests, Charlotte's famous character of Mr. Edward Rochester can be matched with Charlotte's own idea of a love object. She had fallen in love with her instructor and employer at school in Brussels, who was a married man significantly older than herself, and also she seemed to care more for father figures. Her father lost his eyesight in later years, and this caused her much concern. It is interesting that Mr. Rochester is almost twice Jane's age, and that he also loses his sight, giving Jane great pleasure in caring for him during their married life. Her *Jane Eyre* is also certainly different from her sisters' works, though similar in themes, especially in its quest for belonging, yet also in its appreciation of loneness, which I know is very similar with Charlotte's own personality.

In conclusion, the three books, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* all reflect numerous experiences, characteristics, and elements that Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Bronte all lived through as children growing up in the early 1800s. Conditions were hard, family troubles grievous, feelings of the heart deep and mysterious, and the moors about them free and alluring.

The girls themselves were living testimonies to unique ways of coping with a dark, Gothic childhood. As Elizabeth Gaskell remembers, "Emily's countenance struck me as full of power; Charlotte's of solicitude; Anne's of tenderness." (Gaskell & Easson, 2009, p.106) If their persona was so changed by their upbringing, how much more so were their famous writings affected and influenced? It was the culmination of all these threads of daily life, people met, walks taken, and stories composed that resulted in those three books the world has come to revere and love.

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