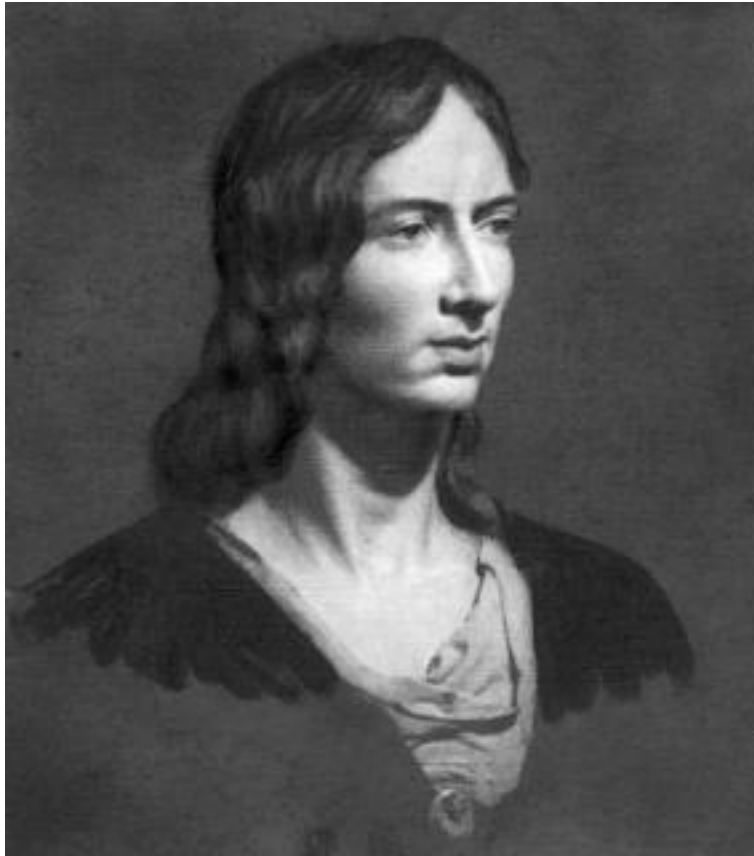


# A Brief Intro to Emily Brontë

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Emily Brontë, English novelist and poet who produces but one novel, *Wuthering Heights* (1847), is born on July 30, 1818 in Thornton, West Riding of Yorkshire, England. She is perhaps the greatest of the three Brontë sisters, but the record of her life is extremely meager, for she is silent and reserved and leaves no correspondence of interest, and her single novel darkens rather than solves the mystery of her spiritual existence.

Emily Brontë has become mythologized both as an individual and as one of the Brontë sisters. She has been cast as Absolute Individual, as Tormented Genius, and as Free Spirit Communing with Nature; the trio of sisters—Charlotte, Emily, and Anne—have been fashioned into Romantic Rebels, as well as Solitary Geniuses. Their lives have been sentimentalized, their psyches psychoanalyzed, and their home life demonized. In truth, their lives and home were strange and often unhappy. Their father was a withdrawn man who dined alone in his own room; their Aunt Branwell, who raised them after the early death of their mother, also dined alone in her room. The two oldest sisters died as children. For three years Emily supposedly spoke only to

family members and servants. Their brother Branwell, an alcoholic and a drug addict, put the family through the hell of his ravings and threats of committing suicide or murdering their father, his physical and mental degradation, his bouts of delirium tremens, and, finally, his death.

As children, Charlotte, Branwell, Emily, and Anne had one another and books as companions; in their isolation, they created an imaginary kingdom called Angria and filled notebooks describing its turbulent history and character. Around 1831, thirteen-year old Emily and eleven-year old Anne broke from the Angrian fantasies, which Branwell and Charlotte had dominated, to create the alternate history of Gondal. Emily maintained her interest in Gondal and continued to spin out the fantasy with pleasure till the end of her life. Nothing of the Gondal history remains except Emily's poems, the references in the journal fragments by Anne and Emily, the birthday papers of 1841 and 1845, and Anne's list of the names of characters and locations.

After the death of their mother in 1821, the children are left very much to themselves in the bleak moorland rectory. The children are educated, during their early life, at home, except for a single year that Charlotte and Emily spend at the Cowan Bridge School at Cowan Bridge in Lancashire. In 1835, when Charlotte secures a teaching position at Miss Wooler's school at Roe Head, Emily accompanies her as a pupil but suffers from homesickness and remains only three months. In 1838 Emily spends six exhausting months as a teacher at Law Hill School, near Halifax, and then resigns.

Little is known directly of Emily Brontë. All that survives of Emily's own words about herself is two brief letters, two diary papers written when she was thirteen and sixteen, and two birthday papers, written when she was twenty-three and twenty-seven. Almost everything that is known about her comes from the writings of others, primarily Charlotte. Even Charlotte's novel, *Shirley*, has been used as a biographical source because Charlotte created *Shirley*, as she told her biographer and friend Elizabeth Gaskell, to be "what Emily Brontë would have been had she been placed in health and prosperity."

In 1845 Charlotte comes across some poems by Emily, and this leads to the discovery that all three sisters have written verse. A year later they publish jointly a volume of verse, *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell*, the initials of these pseudonyms being those of the sisters. It contains 21 of Emily's poems, and a consensus of later criticism has accepted the fact that Emily's verse alone reveals true poetic genius. The venture costs the sisters about £50 in all, and only two copies are sold.

Often *Wuthering Heights* is used to construct a biography of Emily's life, personality, and beliefs. Edward Chitharn equates Emily, the well-read housekeeper of the family home, with

Nelly based on the similarity of their roles and the similarity of their names, "Nelly" being short for "Ellen" which is similar to Emily's pseudonym "Ellis." The supposed anorexia of Catherine, who stops eating after Edgar's ultimatum, and of Heathcliff, who stops eating at the end, is used as proof of Emily's anorexia; support for this interpretation is found in the tendency of all four Brontë siblings not to eat when upset. Alternately, Emily's supposed anorexia is used to explain aspects of the novel. Katherine Frank characterizes Emily as a constantly hungry anorexic who denies her constant hunger; "Even more importantly," Frank asks, "how was this physical hunger related to a more pervasive hunger in her life—hunger for power and experience, for love and happiness, fame and fortune and fulfilment?" Well, one expression of these hungers is the intense focus on food, hunger, and starvation in *Wuthering Heights*. Furthermore, the kitchen is the main setting, and most of the passionate or violent scenes occur there.

Similarly, Emily's poems are used to interpret her novel, particularly those poems discussing isolation, rebellion, and freedom. Readings of *Wuthering Heights* as a mystical novel, a religious novel, or a visionary novel call on "No coward soul is mine," one of her best poems. The well known "Riches I hold in light esteem" is cited to explain her choice of a reclusive lifestyle, as is "A Chainless Life." The fact that many of these poems were written as part of the Gondal chronicles and are dramatic speeches of Gondal characters is blithely ignored or explained away. (In 1844 Emily went through her poems, destroying some, revising others, and writing new poems; she collected them and clearly labeled the Gondal poems.)

The poems and *Wuthering Heights* have also been connected. The editor of her poems, C.W. Hatfield, sees the same mind at work in both, and Charles Morgan perceives in them "the same unreality of this world, the same greater reality of another... and a unique imagination."

By midsummer of 1847 Emily's *Wuthering Heights* and Anne's *Agnes Grey* have been accepted for joint publication by J. Cautley Newby of London, but publication of the three volumes is delayed until the appearance of their sister Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, which is immediately and hugely successful. *Wuthering Heights*, when published in December 1847, does not fare well. Critics are hostile, calling it too savage, too animal-like, and clumsy in construction. Only later does it come to be considered one of the finest novels in the English language.

Soon after the publication of her novel, Emily's health begins to fail rapidly. She had been ill for some time, but now her breathing becomes difficult and she suffers great pain. She dies of tuberculosis on December 19, 1848 in Haworth. She is buried at St. Michael and All Angels' Church in Haworth.