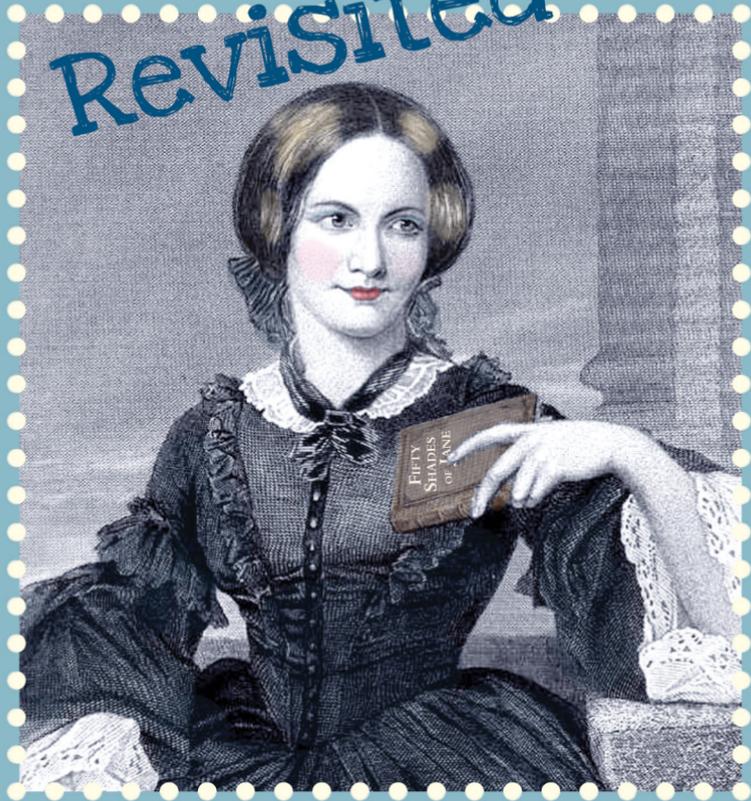


CHARLOTTE BRONTË

Revisited



A view from the twenty-first century

Sophie Franklin

CHARLOTTE
BRONTË
REVISITED



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INTRODUCTION

Charlotte Brontë Revisited



THERE'S A PHOTO OF ME STANDING in a graveyard smiling, surrounded by bright green foliage and memorial stones. Trees rise above my head out of eyeshot. Behind me is the top of a grey house, with four of its symmetrical windows in view, and a little wooden gate that separates the building from the graves. There's nothing particularly notable or even eerie about the picture. It's just a young woman standing at a distance from the camera in an overgrown graveyard with a house behind her.

Except it's not just that. For a lot of people – myself included – it's quite a lot more. That house behind me is Haworth Parsonage, the Yorkshire home of the Brontë family more than 150 years ago.

Every year, thousands of tourists make the pilgrimage up the steep, cobbled main street of Haworth to the Brontë Parsonage and Museum. Some of these people are devoted fans of Anne, Charlotte or Emily – as well as Branwell (their brother), or Patrick (their father). Some simply want to tick this destination off their touristy to-do list. Whatever their

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passion, people are drawn to this place, which has become so imbued with a cultural and even otherworldly significance since the mid-19th century.

It's the same impulse that took me to that spot in the graveyard, smiling for the camera. Looking again at that photo now, three years on, I'm amazed at the morbidity of it. Or maybe I mean the uncanny *absence* of morbidity, which has been replaced by a strange glee that somehow seems natural in that lush setting. What possessed me to pose for that picture? Why do so many people clamber up that hill and take photos of a house and graves, and smile while doing so? Somehow it feels too simplistic just to say 'the Brontës' and move on.

Now – some 200 years since Charlotte Brontë's birth in 1816 – feels like the right time to reflect on everything she achieved and still represents. Of course, the Yorkshire moors and the whole 'three weird sisters' thing that Ted Hughes coined in his 1979 poem, 'Haworth Parsonage', are still prominent in people's imaginations. This has shaped, and continues to shape, the reception of Anne, Emily and Charlotte's respective books; and, most dramatically, our view of their lives. But in recent years, Brontë scholars have sought to unpick the fables that surround Charlotte and her sisters, and instead offer an account of their lives stripped of mythology. In doing so, you could say the Brontës have been resurrected and reclaimed – at least in an academic and literary context. This book, however, aims to do something a little different, by revisiting Charlotte from a modern-day perspective, reconsidering why she still matters, and seeing whether there are any parallels between how we live now and how she lived then.

It begins with an overview of Charlotte's life and works. This chapter isn't necessarily designed to give my own 'version' of Charlotte, although – as with all biographical accounts – I'm sure my own prejudices will intrude somewhere. Neither is it meant as an exhaustive insight into her

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inner, or indeed outer, world. Think of it more as my edited highlights of her life, a series of snapshots that offer a glimpse into the various experiences that shaped her and her writing. At the end of the first chapter I have also included a chronology of the main events in Charlotte's life.

There have been numerous biographies of Charlotte and there will surely be more to come in the future. But this isn't necessarily a bad thing. After all, new Brontë discoveries are still emerging. In November 2015, a short story written by Charlotte in 1833 was discovered tucked away in a book owned by her mother. The nature of biographies, and their cultural significance, have also changed over the years – from moralistic myth-makers to grittier, perhaps more realistic portrayals. Chapter Two gives a necessary primer to the previous biographies, both the sensible and the saintly, in a bid to discover the 'real Charlotte' and to ask whether there even is such a thing.

Charlotte often fuses her fictional descriptions of scenery with her characters' mental states, so that nature takes on a symbolic importance of its own. Not only is it central to her writing; it was also a big part of her life from a young age. Her youthful works are full of sweeping landscapes and dark, intense places where her characters can be and do whatever they wish. And, of course, in real life she walked for miles on the moors with her sisters, so much so that the surrounding area is now known as Brontë Country, as though each stamp of their boots was a stamp of ownership. Charlotte was also influenced by poems with an eye on nature, especially William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, which emphasises the connection between humanity and the surrounding empirical world. Her own nature writing combines these inspirations to become a visceral representation of both the world around her and the imagined world inside her head. Chapter Three takes a fresh look at Charlotte's nature writing and how it relates to the genre's recent upsurge.

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Despite being a pro at scaring friends at school with her nightly horror stories, Charlotte was herself quite superstitious. She witnessed the deaths of Branwell, Anne and Emily within nine months of each other, and so it is little wonder she became less fond of gruesome tales. But that didn't stop her from including paranormal incidents in her writing. *Villette* in particular blends reality with fantasy, and its narrator, Lucy Snowe, experiences several eerie encounters of her own. And, in *Jane Eyre*, there is the infamous scene in which Jane hears Rochester's voice on the wind even though she's miles from Ferndean (it does require some suspension of disbelief).

These supernatural events tell us a lot about the psychology of the characters and the use of paranormal activities in 19th-century fiction. Nowadays, such experiences need to be explained and rationalised; otherwise, they're dismissed as silly and unconvincing. Even my comment in brackets above reveals my own feelings about these contrived antics. Really, it's time we reassessed our own perceptions of the unknown and the uncanny. By revisiting Charlotte's superstitious perspective and supernatural descriptions, Chapter Four will do just that.

Chapter Five sets out to question the uniqueness of Charlotte's views on politics and women – and it's not always what you'd expect. Apart from *Shirley*, Charlotte's second published novel set during the Luddite rebellion, her work is not explicitly political. As she told her publisher and friend George Smith, rather self-deprecatingly, she lacked the skill to write books about 'the topics of the day'.¹ On closer inspection, and despite her protestations, Charlotte was in fact acutely political, perhaps especially from our 21st-century position. Her female narrators are complex and not always likeable individuals who walk their own path. Such characters have rightly earned Charlotte the title of 'proto-feminist'.

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And then there's her Toryism. Although it isn't necessarily a focal point of her fiction, her politics did mould her outlook on society and therefore fed into her literature. Being a Tory was a bit different then from supporting the Conservative Party today, though. She may have been conservative with a small 'c' and revered the Duke of Wellington (one of the heroes of her younger writings), but her path in life was undoubtedly unconventional, so it isn't unsurprising that she is often deemed rebellious and anti-establishment.

The last chapter maps the different locations around Britain and Europe that Charlotte visited, as a means of countering the belief that the Brontës were isolated, unworldly and therefore unsophisticated. In fact, Charlotte in particular travelled quite widely, visiting the Lake District, Scotland, London and Brussels, amongst other places. Far from living an existence devoid of interaction or friendship, she was very much in the world. By tracing her numerous journeys, readers can go out and find Charlotte for themselves.

Finally, extracts from Charlotte's novels and letters have been included throughout this book, in order to place her voice at the centre of each chapter.

* * *

A few years after the smiling photo in the graveyard, I stand beside Anne Brontë's grave, which looks over Scarborough beach. My mum takes a photo of me and the two stones. This time I don't really smile. Instead, I ask myself why I did this; why I do this. Why so many of us continue to seek such strange forms of connection with long-dead authors, artists, people we never knew; and why those people still mean so much.

This book attempts in some small way to answer these questions.