

“Fraternal and Sisterly Love”: Observing Disintegration and Resilience in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall and Shirley

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Abstract

The Brontës in 1845 were a tight-knit community in Haworth of three grown-up sisters and a brother – Charlotte, Emily, Anne, and Branwell. In chapter 33, “And you,” Jane Eyre passionately claims to St. John, “cannot at all imagine the craving I have for fraternal and sisterly love.” The fictional Jane Eyre, the orphan, is the protagonist of *Jane Eyre* (1847), written by Charlotte Brontë. While the three sisters took up pseudonyms of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell and each published novels independently, the writings in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Shirley* are more telling about their tender “fraternal and sisterly love” for each other. In 1848, Anne depicted her “fraternal love” for Branwell, who was addicted to drink and drugs, in her second and last novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Tragedy strikes as he died of tuberculosis in 1848, followed a few months after by Emily. Subsequently, Anne died in 1849. Surviving with her father, Charlotte continued writing and publishing the work now known as *Shirley* (1849). Although not an orphan, Jane Eyre’s “craving” for “sisterly love” is apparent in Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Shirley*. Critics have suggested that Caroline Helstone is modeled after her sister Anne in her severe illness. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Shirley* testify “fraternal and sisterly love” delved in *Jane Eyre*, as well as the resilience to carry on through life by writing literature.

Keywords: Brontës, Rivers, Jane Eyre, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, Shirley, Sickness, Resilience, Haworth Parsonage, Writing, Literature

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I. Introduction: Haworth, The Glass Town, and the Angrian Saga

Although there are many talented writers, few writers come from the same family generation, such as the Brontës. The compositions of the Brontës have surfaced in new scholarly editions promoting the not widely known Angrian saga and the Glass Town stories written in their home, Haworth Parsonage. The new limelight upon Branwell Brontë's once-obscure writings has provided new insights between the other siblings and their interactions through mutual storytelling. Enjoying their imaginative and passionate excursions through literature was an outlet to enhance their literary aptitudes. The close coterie of budding writers dares to write during all sorts of adversities. The Brontë siblings created various chronicles and stories of interest to the multitudes of readers: "They developed a rich fantasy life amongst themselves, constructing together the imaginary world of Glass Town and writing of it in dozens of microscopically printed 'books'" ("Jane Eyre - Poche").

Although there have been many articles on Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, rarely has there been reading of the novel as an autobiographical reflection of the Brontë siblings in the form of the three Rivers siblings – St. John, Diana, and Mary – and their peculiar and eccentric cousin, Jane Eyre. This article contends that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Shirley* testify "fraternal and sisterly love" delved in *Jane Eyre*. Moreover, the Brontë siblings show that writing literature inculcates resilience to carry on through life's hardships.

II. The Rivers and the Brontës

Although some critics have argued that St. John in *Jane Eyre* embodies Charlotte Brontë's suitors, her brother Branwell is a likely candidate for the author's depiction of St. John. Although the publisher Smith, Elder, and Co, Cornhill marketed the novel as edited by Charlotte Brontë's pseudonym, Currer Bell, *Jane Eyre's* subtitle as "An Autobiography" on the title page. Moreover, in chapter 33 of the novel, Jane Eyre passionately claims to St. John that "And you, cannot at all imagine the craving I [Jane Eyre] have for fraternal and sisterly love." Jane Eyre's cousins, the Rivers family, consists of Diana, Mary, and St. John. The Rivers family members resemble the Brontës in that there are two sisters and one brother. Interpreted from this context, Charlotte Brontë, the literal embodiment of Jane Eyre who uses the alias of Jane Elliot (so that she might remain hidden from Mr. Rochester), might have seen herself as different or eccentric from other siblings because she is positioned as a family relative – a cousin to the Rivers.

In the words of Du Maurier, Branwell had features such as "the high forehead, the fine Roman nose, the mass of tawny hair so like his [Patrick Bronte] own." In *Jane Eyre*, St. John's features are described in detail:

Had he been a statue instead of a man, he could not have been easier. He was young—perhaps from twenty-eight to thirty—tall, slender; his face riveted the eye; it was like a Greek face, very pure in outline: quite a straight, classic nose; quite an Athenian mouth and chin. It is seldom, indeed, an English face comes so near the antique models as did his. He might well be a little shocked at the irregularity of my lineaments, his own being so harmonious. His eyes were large and blue, with brown lashes; his high forehead, colourless as ivory, was partially streaked over by careless locks of fair hair. (*Jane Eyre* 308)

Although the fictional Jane describes St. John as different from Du Maurier's description, the inner turmoil and kinship of spirits between Charlotte (the narrative voice, Jane Eyre) and

Branwell (in this case, St. John) are apparent from this passage:

I was sure St. John Rivers—pure-lived, conscientious, zealous as he was—had not yet found that peace of God which passeth all understanding: he had no more found it, I thought, than had I with my concealed and racking regrets for my broken idol and lost elysium—regrets to which I have latterly avoided referring, but which possessed me and tyrannised over me ruthlessly. (*Jane Eyre* 315)

Moreover, literary critics have shed light on Charlotte and Branwell Brontë's special relationship distinct from the other siblings. Du Maurier claims that "Whatever Branwell read, whatever he was taught, whatever piece of local gossip or general news he picked up during the day, was at once sifted in his mind, discussed with Charlotte, and reproduced on paper." It is well-known that "Charlotte and her brother Branwell invented their shared kingdom of Angria in 1834" ("Jane Eyre - Poche").

In contrast to cold St. John, his sisters, Diana and Mary, are described as amiable as follows: I could join Diana and Mary in all their occupations; converse with them as much as they wished, and aid them when and where they would allow me. There was a reviving pleasure in this intercourse, of a kind now tasted by me for the first time—the pleasure arising from perfect congeniality of tastes, sentiments, and principles.

I liked to read what they liked to read: what they enjoyed, delighted me; what they approved, I revered. (*Jane Eyre* 312)

This passage reminds readers of the close-knit circle between Charlotte and her real sisters, Emily and Anne Brontë. *Jane Eyre* confesses that "I liked to read what they liked to read," showing that they are kindred spirits who share a common interest in reading and writing books.

There is further supporting evidence that St. John and the Rivers sisters are Brontë family members of Charlotte in the following excerpt:

"And you," I [*Jane Eyre*] interrupted, "cannot at all imagine the craving I have for fraternal and sisterly love. I never had a home, I never had brothers or sisters; I must and will have them now: you are not reluctant to admit me and own me, are you?"

"Jane, I will be your brother—my sisters will be your sisters—without stipulating for this sacrifice of your just rights." (*Jane Eyre* 346)

St. John recognizes *Jane Eyre*'s "craving" for "fraternal and sisterly love," and he responds to her that "I will be your brother - my sisters will be your sisters." The strong bond between *Jane Eyre* and St. John reflects the special relationship between Charlotte and Branwell.

Although connecting contextual information to the text can fulfill the biographical fallacy, knowing such cultural and familial influences can make readers understand what characters initiated writing this novel. A text, particularly a novel marketed with the subtitle of being 'an autobiography' such as *Jane Eyre*, must reflect some aspect of the author's daily experience in Victorian England. The novel's popularity derives from the realistic aspects that reflected the current culture, common personality traits, and prevalent social norms. The characters in the novel do not seem foreign or made up because they can be related to everyday people. Even though connecting the Rivers with the Brontë writers can be criticized for stretching the facts into wild imagination, this framework can be leeway as another lens or channel for

interpreting the rich text.

III. Arthur Huntingdon: The Spoilt and Debauched Branwell Brontë

Anne Brontë's novel, published in 1848, was controversial in Victorian England's publishing world. Her elder sister, Charlotte Brontë, prevented the novel from being republished after a year and claimed that her sister Anne had written a work that was "a mistake." Although it was a scandalous subject for Victorian society, readers bought the novel copies within six weeks.

Stevie Davis articulates that Anne Brontë might have been thinking of her brother Branwell while conjuring the character of Arthur Huntingdon. In the "Introduction" of the 1996 Penguin Classics of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the following passage draws attention to this hypothesis:

But the author of this historical novel insists in her Preface that this is 'truth': 'I know' that such characters do exist' (p.4) She [Anne Brontë] had lived in books but, at Thorp Green, she had seen at first hand the behavior of the gentry and aristocracy (Branwell liked to boast that the Robinson family was collateral to a Marquis and a Member of the Parliament); Anne's employer would remarry to become Lady Scott. She could say 'I know' because she had lived through a momentous equivalent of the events transcribed in *Wildfell Hall* and had tasted the disgrace of a beloved brother, sharing his disintegration as if she were (as indeed a sister is, in a literal sense) 'one flesh' (xxviii).

Citing from the exact text of Stevie Davis, the following section piques the readers' imagination of what biographical influence might have happened behind the closed doors of Haworth Parsonage:

She [Anne Brontë] dated her Preface 22 July 1848. Branwell was at home, in advanced stages of addiction. Six days later, Charlotte wrote that his 'constitution is shattered'; 'he sleeps all day' and is 'awake all night.' Two months later, on 24 September, he was dead. Eight months later, the twenty-nine-year-old author of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* followed him, making a self-commanding Christian death of awesome control and determination: 'Take courage, Charlotte; take courage.'¹ (xxix)

Although this interpretation of Charlotte Brontë disliking or advocating to defend her brother Branwell's reputation might be trustworthy, Anne Brontë fondly describes the fictional double, Arthur Huntingdon, fondly with his merits and faults. Huntingdon is very affectionate, gentle, and loving towards Helen in their courtship. While Helen writes against her husband, Arthur, for his addiction to alcohol, foul language, and violence, she writes in her diary entries (which consists of the main text of the novel) that he once doted upon her in the early stages of marriage.

¹ Ellen Nussey's account to Mrs. Gaskell, SHLL, Vol. II, p.336 (Notes from Stevie Davis's 1996 Introduction to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*)

Iv. ‘Take Courage, Charlotte; Take Courage’

Although not an orphan, Jane Eyre’s “craving” for “sisterly love” is apparent in Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Shirley*. Critics that have suggested that Caroline Helstone is modeled after her sister Anne Brontë in severe illness. Ann-Marie Richardson, in her article, voices that Caroline Helstone is a merging of the real-life siblings of Branwell and Anne Brontë:

If Caroline Helstone was a reflection of what Branwell could have been, she was also an echo of Anne Brontë as she was. The feminine foil for Shirley, just as Anne was for Emily, she is obedient and beautiful and a vision of how Charlotte perceived her youngest sister. Charlotte identified Anne in such angelic, if often insipid, terms that upon her death in 1849 she wrote to William Smith Williams stating she felt able to “let Anne go to God and felt He had a right to her” ([1849] 1997,237). While she could not rescue Anne herself from death, she would protect the character she inspired. (17)

Richardson reflects that the death of her brother and two sisters in *Shirley* is “guarding her siblings in fiction in a way she could not in life” (30).

V. Conclusion: Writing as a Rite of Passage to Resilience

The Brontë family shared a common interest in embarking on imaginative excursions. Examining Brontë Quatro’s work differently from this article would enliven discussions on how texts are intertextual. Charlotte Brontë, the well-known author of *Jane Eyre*, shapes an orphan figure whose cousins resemble her real-life siblings. Similarly, Anne Brontë draws upon Branwell’s addiction to drink and drugs culminating in his early demise by her elusive creation, Arthur Huntington. The fictional Huntington is a lovable and affectionate husband to Helen despite his faults.

A definition of resilience is: “The capacity to remain flexible in our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors when faced by a life disruption, or extended periods of pressure, so that we emerge from difficulty stronger, wiser, and more able” (Pemberton 2). In short, it is one’s ability to bounce back and face hardships rather than crumble or disintegrate. Although it is easier said than done, resilience is valuable for the growth of character. Rebounding after failure is challenging. Following her brother, Branwell, and her sisters, Emily and Anne’s untimely death, Charlotte Brontë overcomes the grief of losing her origin of courage - her “fraternal and sisterly love” - by writing *Shirley*. Composing literature in the face of sorrow, grief, and loss is not an easy feat, and it deserves recognition as a trajectory towards resilience.

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