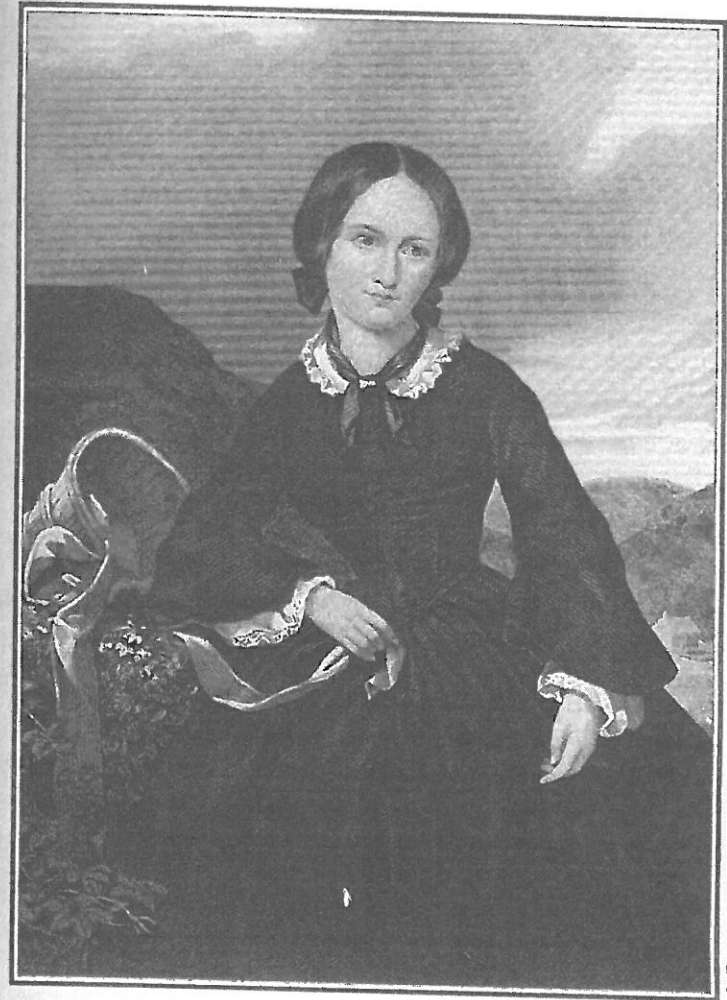


street before he collapsed in the gutter in a deep alcoholic coma. A horse ambulance happened by, and they saw Poe. They threw him in the wagon and dumped him at the front gate of the charity ward of a hospital. Poe survived three days. On the third day he opened his eyes wide, raised his head from his pillow, and screamed out in a voice so loud the entire ward heard him, "God have mercy on my soul!" And then he fell back, dead.

He had just turned forty. He had never had a complete success in his life. The four women he had loved all died in agony in front of him. Everything he touched turned into utter disaster. Yet today more people in the world read the poems and short stories of Edgar Allan Poe than the works of any other American author. Poe is our number one literary export, surpassing even Mark Twain. My father, who grew up in Hungary, told me that in Hungary as a young boy he had never heard of Shakespeare, never heard of Dickens, but by sixth grade he was reading the stories of Edgar Allan Poe translated into Hungarian. Ask anyone in France who was the greatest writer in the English language and he or she will answer Edgar Allan Poe. This would sound even more impressive if we could forget that the French also think that Jerry Lewis is the world's greatest comedian. In an ironic twist of fate that Poe himself might have appreciated, his works—like the delicate and ill-fated ladies he created—come to life again and again.



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Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855)
&
Emily Brontë (1818–1848)

As we turn to the mysterious Brontë sisters—Charlotte Brontë, who wrote *Jane Eyre*, and Emily Brontë, who wrote *Wuthering Heights*—we begin by examining the name itself. *Brontë* is an unusual one, especially in the field of Victorian authors. The names of the other great authors of the Victorian period—Dickens, Tennyson, Browning, Thackeray, Meredith, Hardy—are all very English-sounding. But the name Brontë is exotic, foreign in sound. If you were to guess, you might suppose it is French, and you would be correct. But how much French blood flowed through the veins of Charlotte and Emily Brontë? Not one ounce. How can this be? To solve such a puzzle you must start with the sisters' father. His first name was Patrick, but his last name was originally Brunty. If you wonder what sort of name Brunty is, let me give you a clue: it had been changed from O'Brunty. It is, of course, an Irish name.

You may also wonder why I am ignoring the other Brontë sister, Anne. She did indeed write two novels—*Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*—but they are of a much lower order than those of Charlotte and Emily. The single most impressive feature of Anne's fiction is that it was written by the sister of two literary geniuses.

The father of these two literary geniuses was born Irish on St. Patrick's Day to dirt-poor parents who were tenant farmers. There seemed to be no future for him. But although Patrick Brunty was poor, he was brilliant. And he knew that if he was ever to rise in society, he could only do so in the Church of England. He decided to become a rector. He also knew, however, he had two formidable handicaps. First of all, his name, Brunty, just cried out poor Irish. It would have to be changed, and so it was. When Patrick was still a teenager, he picked up the newspaper one day and noticed that Lord Nelson, the great British hero of the Napoleonic era, had been given an honorary title, the Duke of Brontë. Patrick thought that name seemed exotic and would make people take notice. After all, how many people are allowed to place two dots above the final letter of their last name? So the entire family has always been known as Brontë. If you recollect the eeriness of both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, and the importance of atmosphere and how it pervades the entire novels, you perhaps understand an Irish influence upon these two great authors.

Patrick's second handicap was being single. If he was going to be taken seriously, he needed just the right wife for a rector. Unfortunately for her, he found her, Maria Branwell. Her background was nothing like his. She came from Penzance in Cornwall, a region with one of the mildest climates in England. The two met, fell in love, and married. I think it is important that you understand the exact chronology of the Brontë marriage. They married in 1812. In 1813 their first child, a daughter, Maria, was born. In 1814 their second daughter, Elizabeth, was born. In 1816 their third daughter, Charlotte, was born. In 1818 their fourth child,

another daughter, Emily, was born. In 1818 their fifth child, their only son, Branwell, was born. In 1820 their sixth child, another daughter, Anne, was born. And in 1821 Mrs. Brontë died, and who can blame her? Six children and one miscarriage in seven years of marriage. The year that poor Mrs. Brontë died was also the year Patrick Brontë was assigned to the parish that he would keep for life.

He had once said he wanted a London parish, but would accept a Manchester parish if necessary. But his church did not place him in London, nor in Manchester; the church gave Mr. Brontë one of the most desolate parishes in England, Haworth, in Yorkshire, in the far isolation of the northern moors. The parsonage was surrounded on three sides by the graves of the dead parishioners, a truly ghastly "neighborhood" for a young family. Not long after taking up his duties in Haworth, Brontë's wife died and left him a widower with six children, aged seven, six, four, two, one, and an infant. His first task was to find a caretaker for the family, and he called upon his dead wife's sister Elizabeth Branwell, who lived in Penzance. She gave up her comfortable life there and came to serve as housekeeper and substitute mother.

Patrick Brontë was an eccentric and exacting father, but his children took full advantage of one of his passions—a wonderful library. The four children could be found reading books from the earliest age. Now, you notice I said four children, even though there had been six in the family. But they didn't remain six for long, because the two oldest girls, Maria and Elizabeth, were sent off to a boarding school. Of course Mr. Brontë had little money to spare on education, but there were schools back then specifically for poor rectors' children. These schools were inexpensive; they were also night-

marish. The two Brontë girls were sent to Cowan Bridge School and suffered there under appalling conditions, eventually being taken home ill. Their release from the cold, hunger, and disease of Cowan Bridge came too late—both girls died within five weeks of each other. At the ages of eleven and ten, Charlotte and Emily lost their two beloved older sisters. For a detailed portrait of Cowan Bridge School, read the early chapters of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Jane is sent to a school called Lowood, run by the villain Mr. Brocklehurst. According to Charlotte Brontë, Lowood's brutal conditions are an exact replica of those that killed her sisters.

One day Mr. Brontë came home from a journey and brought the four remaining Brontë children some beautiful wooden painted soldiers. He gave them to Branwell, who shared them with his sisters. Now, had these been normal children, they would likely have used the toy soldiers to play at war. Instead they went to the parlor, put the soldiers on the floor in various positions, and then pretended these soldiers were creatures from two fantasy kingdoms. The four Brontë children divided themselves into two writing groups, Branwell and Charlotte in one, Emily and Anne in the other.

Emily and Anne created a world called Gondal. It was a "science-fictiony" world where the rivers ran with milk and honey and all the trees looked like strange triangles. It was a beautiful, exotic world, very strange, peopled by the toy soldiers. Charlotte and Branwell invented a very different world, Angria. This fantasy world was what it sounds like, a pulsing, almost vicious world where the rivers ran red and a constant, strong beat was underneath. They wrote minutely

detailed adventure stories of the soldiers who populated Angria. For over ten years, these four children expanded the two worlds through stories. But they didn't just write stories, they actually wrote books. Once an adventure story had been completed, the children would print the stories on little pieces of paper. They made sure the margins were even, right and left, just as in a printed novel, and when they finished, the little book looked like a tiny novel. Of course they needed a cover for their book, so they would raid the kitchen. Sugar came in blue cardboard boxes. They would pour the sugar into an earthen vessel, then cut up the stiff blue cardboard to make a perfect cover. They would put the title on the cover, with their names. They would use a little paste to glue it on, and presto, a tiny volume smaller than their palms. But they didn't compile just ten or even fifty of these stories—they wrote hundreds over the years. This was their training, as children, for the future novelists that at least three of them would become.

Mr. Brontë was not much impressed that his children were writing these vivid adventure books; his concern was with who would earn much-needed income once they left school. Charlotte was the eldest; the responsibility fell upon her. When she graduated from school, she began to seek employment. Charlotte was extremely bright, but she came from a poor rector's family. If a woman of that time was bright and yet poor, only one position was really available. If you have read *Jane Eyre*, you know what Charlotte became—a governess. I don't think we appreciate today what the position of governess was like in the Victorian period. Thanks to *Masterpiece Theatre* we have a romantic notion of a beautiful young girl employed in a wealthy

home, tutoring darling little children. Charlotte tells us the reality—that being a governess was hell on earth. It was a wretched position. Darling, well-behaved children; were rare. Truly wealthy people didn't have a governess tutor their children, they sent their children to expensive boarding schools. Boarding school was a mark of status, a way to cement societal connections, as well as an educational experience. If, however, parents had a lot of money but had children who were such intellectual or emotional nightmares that no school would ever accept them, a governess was the solution. Occasionally one could find a good child, but only because the child was illegitimate (as Adele was in *Jane Eyre*) and therefore not eligible for a good boarding school.

The other problem the governess faced, probably a worse ordeal than not having decent students, was that the family would have nothing to do with her because she was considered too low in class to be part of their society. The governess actually worked for a living, and the family that hired her would have thought that was below their regard. But there was an upstairs *and* a downstairs in the family. Downstairs were the servants: the butler, the cook, the housekeeper, and the maids. They certainly wouldn't have found the governess too low to associate with—she was too high. Servants resented that “all she did” was tutor some brats for a few hours a day and thus earned three times what the kitchen maid earned by scrubbing pots. The family had nothing to do with a governess because she was too low; the servants had nothing to do with her because she was too high. It was a most painfully alienating position, unless the governess was beautiful. If you examine some of the family portraits that were painted of wealthy Victorian families,

you will see in many portraits a rather ugly father, a plain mother, and three unattractive children. The sixth figure will be a beautiful and delightful young woman. You might think, “Well, at least they had one attractive child.” They didn't. That's the governess. The upstairs family enjoyed having the beautiful governess because she was so attractive. The servants, the downstairs family, prized having a beautiful governess around because by just eating at the humble table of the servants this beautiful girl put everyone in a good mood.

But Charlotte Brontë was not beautiful; she was not even plain. A young man who saw her at a party wrote to his fiancée that night, “I met Miss Brontë tonight and I would have to say she would have to be twice as good-looking as she actually is to be considered homely.” Charlotte Brontë was ugly: don't be fooled by the somewhat attractive picture I've included; Victorian portraits were notoriously flattering. She was about four feet ten, tiny, with a reddish complexion. I do not emphasize her ugliness in any invidious sense; I tell you she is ugly as a great compliment to Charlotte Brontë. Because she was so unattractive, when she would later invent her immortal heroine, Jane Eyre, created in her own image, she did something for Jane that no other author had done for a heroine. We know Jane is unattractive before we even open the novel. Why? The name of the novel is *Jane Eyre*. This was revolutionary at that time—no one had ever named a heroine Jane before. The name Jane always implied “plain Jane.” Consider the names of the heroines of earlier novels: Clarissa, Evelina, Pamela . . . Just from the name Jane, readers knew she was going to be unattractive. And in the novel itself we are not left in doubt as to what Jane looked

like. Her lover, Mr. Rochester, at one point says, "Though the world considers you ugly, I see beneath that façade." This is hardly what a young lady wants to hear from her beau in courtship. Charlotte Brontë has given us the first realistic heroine in English literature. As one critic wrote, "*Jane Eyre* is the story of an ugly duckling who grows up to be an ugly duck." There is no swan in *Jane Eyre* nor was there meant to be. Charlotte was unattractive and sullen, and therefore temperamentally unsuited to be a governess. She had no success as one, and she returned home.

We turn now to the second daughter, Emily. Was Emily unattractive? No, she was very attractive. She was five feet seven, tall for a young woman back then; she held herself regally, had a fine figure and an attractive face. How did she, in turn, fare on the governess market? We will never know because Emily was so eccentric in personality she was never considered governess material. Emily's problem was mental, not physical. She was excessively shy and withdrawn. We learn from Charlotte that when Emily was a teenager, she would spend five or six hours in her bedroom simply standing at the window and gazing out. That would be strange enough. But while she gazed, the white window blind was closed; she wasn't looking at the view of the moors, she was spending hours looking at simply this white window blind. Charlotte noted that if you passed close enough to Emily, you would see her mouth moving and you could hear her talking. She was inventing future characters for her Gondal stories, projecting those characters onto that white screen as we project characters onto a motion picture screen today. She was watching her creations and making up their dialogue.

Now we come to Branwell. Branwell was good-looking and brilliant in school; he could paint and fence and draw, sing and play musical instruments. Anything Branwell did he seemed to do perfectly. Adults found him delightful to be with. His peers looked upon him as a natural hero. All the Brontës were convinced that if their name was to live beyond their age, it would be because of this paragon, Branwell. But Patrick Brontë was so worried that Branwell would not choose the perfect profession that he begged his son not to make any decisions as to his future life too quickly—a ruinous delay.

Anne, the youngest, was neither as bright as Charlotte nor as attractive as Emily, but because she was both good-looking and had a good mind, she made a superb governess. The first family to employ her had a four-year-old little girl who was so wretchedly behaved that they had had six governesses in thirteen months. But Anne Brontë had such wonderful gifts as a governess that within six months she had turned the little demon into an angel, eager to learn. The parents were so delighted with Anne they doubled her salary and expressed their regret that as a female she could not tutor their troublesome son. The parents said, "If only you knew of a young man who could do for our son what you did for our daughter, we would hire him." Anne, ever conscious of her family's needs, responded that she knew of the perfect candidate—Branwell, of course. The parents immediately sent for Branwell to join the family with Anne.

Unfortunately, Branwell must have misunderstood his mission, because the first thing he did upon joining the family was not to tutor the young boy but to conduct a passionate love affair with the mother. Branwell was twenty, the

mother was forty-eight; her name was . . . Mrs. Robinson. I am convinced that the author of *The Graduate* threw in this name for the few of us who could appreciate this very inside joke. When the father of the family, the Reverend Mr. Robinson, found out exactly what Branwell's tutoring encompassed, he of course fired Branwell; unfortunately he fired Anne as well, for as he said, "You have brought this viper into the bosom of our family."

We come to 1846, a troublesome year for the Brontë family in Haworth. All three daughters were once again at home, unemployed. Yet Charlotte, who should have been terribly depressed by the situation, was not. Her enthusiasm and initiative prompted her to a new idea: she and her sisters should put their storytelling gifts to use by writing novels. Branwell had yet to decide upon his life's focus but did not want to participate in this idea. What Charlotte proposed in early 1847 was that during the day all three of them would write their separate novels. At night each of them would read aloud the passages they had written so the other two could critique them. In a short time, she felt, each sister would have a work of her own, and they would have three separate novels to send off to publishers.

Charlotte finished her first novel before Emily and Anne had made a good start on their own. That first novel, not much read today, is titled *The Professor*. Why, Charlotte thought, shouldn't she send it out to see if it could be published before the other two were finished? She indeed sent it out—it came back rejected. She sent it out again—rejected. She sent it out again, and again, and again. She quickly accumulated five rejection slips. And then she sent it out for a sixth try. Actually *The Professor* is not a poor novel. One pos-

sible reason it was rejected so quickly by so many publishers is that Charlotte, though brilliant, was very provincial; she knew nothing of the publishing world. Believe it or not, when she would get the rejected manuscript back, she was in such a hurry to send it out to the next publisher that she never took off the rejection slips. By the time she sent it to the sixth publisher, he had to wade through five rejection slips before he could even read it. Of course he too rejected it. But this became the turning point for Charlotte Brontë, because although the sixth publisher, a man named Smith, rejected it, he wrote a personal note to Charlotte, which said, "If you ever write another novel, please send it to us first." This is hardly high praise, but to Charlotte Brontë, this unattractive girl from the moors who had never been encouraged by anyone, it was enough to fire her creative energy.

At this point it became imperative for the Reverend Mr. Brontë to go to Manchester to have an operation on his cataracts, and he needed one of his children to go with him, to serve as a nurse while he recovered. Charlotte, as the eldest, was the obvious choice. Think, for a moment, about the horrors of that particular operation in 1847. Anesthesia had not yet been developed. After the surgery, Charlotte had no time, by day, for anything but nursing Mr. Brontë. But at night, when Mr. Brontë's pain was so severe he was given morphine to sedate him, Charlotte could turn from her father's hospital bed to the little windowsill of the small window in the hospital room. She propped her journal against it and began to write the first chapters of the immortal *Jane Eyre*.

Upon returning from the hospital, Charlotte was so

quick, so inspired, that she finished this second novel at about the same time Emily and Anne were finishing their first. It was decided to send *Jane Eyre* to Mr. Smith. And we know what happened next. The manuscript arrived at Mr. Smith's office on a Monday morning at about 8:30 A.M. He had no appointment until nine o'clock, so he decided to begin reading *Jane Eyre*. At ten minutes to nine he stepped into the antechamber of his office and told his secretary to cancel all his appointments for the day: "I am reading a manuscript that is so superb it will make our name as a publisher of great fiction." And he was absolutely correct. From the day he read that manuscript right down through today, *Jane Eyre* has always been successful. It was a best-seller for years in Charlotte Brontë's age, and even today, it is always at the top of the classic novels that are sold to schoolchildren and to the general public.

Smith informed Charlotte that his firm would publish her novel. In his letter he asked what name she intended to use—what man's name? Charlotte, in her naïveté, didn't understand; her name was Charlotte Brontë, that was what should be used. Smith responded that of course they couldn't use the name Charlotte Brontë. There had never been a respectable novel by a woman. Hundreds of women used male pseudonyms in the nineteenth century to get published. But not Charlotte Brontë. She let Mr. Smith know she was not going to become a man to publish this book, but she cleverly solved the dilemma—and maintained her integrity. "I won't change my name to a man's," she said. "Change my last name from Brontë to Bell, and make my first name Currer. I want to be Currer Bell." Bell was a common name in the Haworth area. The publisher

wondered, why Currer? And Charlotte told him the obvious: "Because the name Currer is neither a man's name nor a woman's name." It could be either. And when Emily's novel was published, it was under the name Ellis Bell. Anne's novels were by Acton Bell. Charlotte's compromise suited them all.

Jane Eyre was as popular as the publisher hoped it would be. You would think there would have been rejoicing at Haworth, but there was not. At this point Branwell reenters the Brontë story. Branwell—who had the potential to do anything, be anything—had finally decided on the two passions he would devote his life to: alcohol and drugs. He literally drank and drugged himself to death, in Haworth, as his family looked helplessly on. Just weeks before *Jane Eyre* was published, Branwell wasted away, the victim of his dissipation. At Branwell's funeral—for reasons understood only by herself—Emily decided to honor the memory of her brother by going barefoot to the cemetery. There was a terrible storm that day; the temperature dropped thirty degrees. Emily, shortly after Branwell's funeral, contracted a violent cold. The cold became consumption—tuberculosis—and within four months Emily was dying.

Her *Wuthering Heights* was published while she was still alive. As glowing as the reviews were for Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, that is how devastatingly negative the reviews were for Emily's novel. The critics hated it; they called it the work of an immoral and amoral writer. They loathed the Heathcliff/Cathy relationship, failing to grasp the spirituality of the pair's doomed love. All they could see were all the deaths, the wretchedness, and the sadistic tortures that Heathcliff enacted to possess Cathy. Emily, on her deathbed,

insisted on reading every review. And Charlotte tells us Emily read with a smile on her face, as though she knew that someday her creation would be appreciated. Not until the twentieth century did the critical tide turn and *Wuthering Heights* become known as a great novel.

Within six months of Branwell's death Emily was dead. And then another blow: Anne fell prey to consumption as well, immediately after Emily's death. The doctor told Charlotte the only thing that could save Anne was sea air, so Charlotte traveled with Anne to the seaside resort of Scarborough. Anne sank quickly, in a rooming house full of summer holiday-makers; Charlotte watched her last sibling die. She buried Anne there at Scarborough and returned, alone and desolate, to Haworth. She had lost her brother and her two sisters within thirteen months of the publication of *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and Anne's novel, *Agnes Grey*.

How dark and gloomy Haworth now seemed to Charlotte. And although Mr. Brontë and his last remaining child suffered deeply, this tragedy hardly brought them closer together. One evening after father and daughter had sat quietly in the parlor, when both were ready to go upstairs to their separate bedrooms, they met at the bottom of the stairs. Mr. Brontë looked at Charlotte, shook his head, and said, "And you were the runt of the litter and weren't supposed to survive childhood." How did Charlotte survive? She fought her sorrow by writing two more novels. Her novel *Shirley* is not particularly worthwhile, but the other, the rather autobiographical *Villette*, is excellent.

And then, out of nowhere, the unexpected happened: Charlotte, at age thirty-eight, received a proposal of marriage. Her suitor was Arthur Bell Nichols, the curate for Mr.

Brontë. Mr. Brontë, at this point in his life, was extremely antisocial, but if there was one man he absolutely could not tolerate, it was his curate. What did Charlotte think of Arthur Bell Nichols? We know because of her journal; not only did she not love him, she didn't even like him. She thought he was pretentious, stuffy, and dull. Her father, of course, would absolutely forbid any such marriage. Yet when Arthur Bell Nichols begged Charlotte to marry him, Charlotte, after some soul-searching, accepted. Although she had no love for him, to be married to this man would at least give her life perhaps the newness, the warmth, that she craved. But unless her father withdrew his objection, there was no way she could marry Arthur Bell Nichols. Charlotte spent over a year insisting to her father that he allow her to marry this man. Finally, Mr. Brontë gave in. He told her he would not attend the marriage: "If you want to ruin your life and marry Arthur Bell Nichols, I will no longer stand in the way."

So Charlotte married Mr. Nichols. They honeymooned in Ireland, and Charlotte's estimation of Mr. Nichols altered completely. Charlotte, to her great joy, discovered that not only was Mr. Nichols incredibly intelligent, not only did he have the same sense of humor as she, not only was he interested in nature in the same way as she was, but also he treated her like a queen. Finally she had met someone who loved her for who she was. As Charlotte said, she could not have invented a hero for one of her novels who would be more perfect for the heroine than her "lovely Arthur" was for her.

Shortly after the honeymoon Charlotte became pregnant. The two things she had wanted most in life, a husband

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to love, and a child, were granted her almost immediately. She found out she was pregnant in September; she learned she had consumption in December; she was dead in March. The child, seven months inside her, died as well. On the last day of her life, pathetically weakened, she opened her eyes on her deathbed and saw her beloved husband standing over her with a grieving expression. She smiled and whispered, "Do not worry, Arthur, God cannot possibly part us now because we are so happy." They were her last words. None of the Brontë offspring lived past the age of thirty-nine.

Today Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is regarded as perhaps the greatest novel in the English language; many British and American critics say it is better than *Jane Eyre*. But as far as I am concerned, it is Charlotte, not Emily, whom we should admire the most of these two sisters. It was Charlotte, a homely woman from the bleak moors, who by publishing *Jane Eyre* gave us the first best-selling novel written by a woman. Her personal story is as romantic and inspiring as anything she could ever have conceived of writing in her fiction.



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Elizabeth Barret Browning (1806–1861)
&
Robert Browning (1812–1889)