

## Research article

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# Cultural Reflections of Time and Space that Contradict a Legacy in Anne Brontë's Poetry

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**Abstract:** This article looks at Anne Brontë's poetic development within a span of 11 years from 1838 to 1849. The selected six poems – *The North Wind* (1838), *Bluebell* (1840), *To...* (1842), *Night* (1845), *The Narrow Way* (1848), and *Last Lines* (1849) – highlight different stages of artistic development and personal reflection which Anne called the “pillars of witness.” The aim of this article is to present arguments that perplex the myth that was created around her persona after her early death. The article will focus on a close analysis of the above-selected poems aimed at exploring the ways in which the legacy created around Anne Brontë distorts the author's insightful cultural reflections about her era.

**Keywords:** Anne Brontë, English Romanticism, Victorian era, cultural misconceptions, Elizabeth Gaskell, Gondal poems

## Introduction

Mid-nineteenth-century Victorian England was still firmly anchored in its traditional past while moving forward toward scientific and technological developments, state reforms, woman's suffragette movements, and education and housing reforms and becoming “the empire on which the sun never sets” (“British Empire”). This well-known saying alludes to the vast and extensive territories of the empire that spanned multiple geographical areas so that the sun always shone on its territory. The phrase was commonly used in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries when the Spanish and British Empires were the greatest empires on earth. By 1913, the British Empire had influence over 412 million people, 23% of the world's population at the time, and by 1920, it covered 35,500,000 km<sup>2</sup>, or 24% of the Earth's total land area (“British Empire”).

The British monarchy was one of the great monarchies of the nineteenth century; it conveyed pride, strength, power, and domination to the world on a grand scale. To what extent did this expansionist mentality of the monarchy influence the worldview and lives of its average citizens? Within the monarchy itself, life in the country differed from the buzzing pace of metropolitan London and the other larger industrial towns like Manchester and Birmingham. The serene tranquillity and proximity of nature was another facet of life in the first half of the nineteenth century. The Yorkshire moors were the alternative to city dwelling, and they were where the Brontë children lived out much of their lives. This was the natural scenery that inspired the novels and poems of the Brontë sisters in general; however, one should not forget that their experiences at school, abroad, work, and in family life are also integral factors that influenced their work.

This article aims to examine the cultural milieu of the Brontë sisters, with a particular focus on Anne Brontë (1820–1849), the youngest, who is mostly referred to as “quiet, ‘meek and mild,’ the most physically

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frail of the Brontës” (Hay 65). Anne also gained a reputation as the most “pious” and the least talented among the sisters (Hay 90). One of the major questions that Anne Brontë scholarship focuses on is why this Brontë sister’s reputation acquired the above traits and whether they accurately describe her. There is a vast selection of critical works published on the Brontë sisters and their legacy, beginning with Elizabeth Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857). According to Nell Stevens, this work “is moralistic and stultifying; it flattens [Charlotte] Brontë’s brilliantly transgressive nature and confines her to a saccharine version of Victorian female victimhood” (Stevens). Though this specific reference relates to Charlotte Brontë, not her sister Anne, it nevertheless raises many questions; one of the central dilemmas addressed is why Gaskell seemingly went out of her way to distort the Brontë legacy.

Unfortunately, only 5 letters, 2 novels, and 59 poems by Anne Brontë remain. After her early death, Anne’s novels and poems underwent further editing by her sister Charlotte, who sought to correct not only the grammar and spelling of Anne’s works, but also edited and altered whole sections in the novels and within her poems (Hay). Therefore, different editions of both her prose and her poetry exist today. It is interesting to consider Charlotte’s motivation in the revision of Anne’s work. Charlotte was clearly intent on creating a formidable image of Anne Brontë and bolstering her reputation in the outside world. This is perhaps because the 1846 edition of *Poems* by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell (the pseudonyms of Charlotte, Emily, and Anne, respectively) was not well received; the Brontës were unable to sell larger quantities of the volume. In fact, according to contemporary accounts, only two copies of the volume were sold. Furthermore, Anne’s two novels, *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, garnered substantial negative criticism because readers found the works shocking. Nevertheless, the first edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* sold out in a matter of weeks.

Contrary to the myths created around the youngest Brontë sister, most scholarly evidence points to a different Anne Brontë. Anne was honest, passionate, tough, and wrote about controversial issues. Her two novels, *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, were able to shock her readers and have a strong impact, because the first is a sincere portrayal of a governess’ life and its realistic pitfalls, while the second tells the story of a fallen woman. Both novels depict sensitive issues that were widely acknowledged but regarded as taboos. The honesty that shines through Anne Brontë’s novels and poems demonstrates overwhelming strength, courage, and a philosophical depth apparent in her writing (“Anne Brontë in her own words”). Anne’s poetry is brutally clear, honest, and realistic, and this realization has led recent Anne Brontë scholarship to afford her work greater depth, contradicting earlier research, for example, Winnifred Gérin, who according to Hay “assumed that most of Anne’s poems were autobiographical” (739). Her poetry reflects her observations of her closer environment and on a greater scale her outside world. These observations include a wide range of topics, such as nature, animals, feminism, women’s rights, parental roles, and religious faith. In the following pages, I examine a selection of six poems between 1838 and 1849, a span of roughly 10 years: *The North Wind* (1838), *Bluebell* (1840), *To...* (1842), *Night* (1845), *The Narrow Way* (1848), and *Last Lines* (1849). This is a purely subjective selection intent on presenting poems that have acquired a range of scholarly attention. These poems highlight moments of cultural reflections of time and space within Anne Brontë’s literary career and illustrate the richness of her intellect, strong emotions, radicalism, and her final moments of fear, panic, and acknowledgement in the face of death. These poems also aim to illustrate that the poet was certainly religious, but not in the sense that her sister, Charlotte, presented her in the later editions of their works.

## The Real Anne Brontë

It is now the case that “Brontë scholarship has approached that happy state in which every Brontë novel, every letter, and every scrap of known manuscript has been published in scholarly critical editions” (Duckett E195). This may be true; however, the research and work being done in the present is to re-evaluate, expose, and highlight the mistakes and misconceptions that have negatively impacted Anne Brontë’s personal and intellectual integrity.

The Brontës' fame and financial success came with the publication of their novels. Although Charlotte's first novel, *The Professor*, was rejected, her second novel, *Jane Eyre*, was published in the same year as Anne's *Agnes Grey* and Emily's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). All were instant successes. Within a year, Anne's second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, arrived, which was a greater success than Emily's work, because of its controversial theme that caught the interest of the critics and public. Hence, "within six weeks *Wildfell Hall* was sold out, and by July 1848, Anne was writing her now famous preface to the second edition" (Armitage 1999). As I have already mentioned, very little personal correspondence, diary entries, or other writings from Anne Brontë survive. Thus, her *Preface* can be considered important in understanding the author in relation to her novels and her poetry. She explains her objective in writing accordingly:

I wish[ed] to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it. But as the priceless treasure too frequently hides at the bottom of a well, it needs some courage to dive for it, especially as he that does so will be likely to incur more scorn and obloquy for the mud and water into which he has ventured to plunge, than thanks for the jewel he procures. (Armitage "Preface to the second edition")

Anne's *Preface* is vital evidence that problematizes Elizabeth Gaskell's references, alluded to previously in the article, to Anne and to Charlotte's edits to Anne's novels and poems after her death in 1849. Nevertheless, Anne came to be portrayed "as a weak, timid, shy girl, with only moderate literary skills" (Armitage "Preface"). How and why this distortion of Anne's legacy happened still lingers; disputing this false reputation is one of the main concerns of modern Brontë scholarship. After all, it is obvious that in her writing "Anne held up a mirror to society at the time she lived, revealing its fragile beauty and ugly flaws" (Holland 2953). Furthermore, she was quite obviously on the side of "the downtrodden and those who were denied justice, which is why she is in many ways the most radical and relevant of the Brontë sisters" (Holland 2953). However, one should not forget that mid-nineteenth-century England did not favour outspoken women. Victorian England was defined by rigid moral values in which a woman had no rights whatsoever. She was basically the property of either her father or husband, or a male relative. A woman was not supposed to write either books or poems for publication, merely practice such talents as a ladies' hobby permitted. Therefore, any form of intellectual thinking and professionalism was frowned upon by the public. However, in-depth research on the Brontë sisters dating back to the mid-nineteenth century reveals that these young women grew up in an environment that allowed and even encouraged education for the sisters. Patrick Brontë permitted his children to read his books and to study classical Greek and Latin beside the normal routine of studying the Bible. The sisters' education therefore was not limited in the usual manner, but rather gave space for enlarging their creative skills and capacities.

Nell Stevens investigates Gaskell's work, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, to understand the whys of writing a biography that is loaded with misconceptions. "Gaskell understood the value of domesticity to the female writer: for all that it was suffocating, it was also a shield" (Stevens). The intention of Gaskell's work then was to rehabilitate and present "a devoted daughter and sister and, eventually, wife" to the outside world (Stevens). Charlotte did the same with Anne's and Emily's works. Her intention was to preserve their respectability above all else and avoid being stigmatized, even if this meant destroying letters, unpublished material, and, in Anne's case, cutting and altering parts of her novels and her poems. The result was to create a surreal myth of respectable domesticity around Anne, which could blend into the standards of respectability and formality of the Victorian era.

## Writing as a Personal Reflection

Hay notes that "writing was an essential part of life for Anne" (42). In the Brontës' childhood, writing was a form of entertainment whereby Charlotte and Branwell created the imaginary fictional world of Glasstown and Angria, while Emily and Anne formulated the northern landscape of Gondal. The mysterious world of the Gondal saga contained "cold stone castles in which heroines and heroes lamented their imprisonment" (Hay 43). The earliest Gondal poem dates from 1836, when Anne was 16 years of age. These poems seem to

have been inspired by Sir Walter Scott, whose novels of the Scottish Highlands and the northern landscape the children would have been familiar with.

A later poem from 1838 titled *The North Wind* is also a Gondal poem. These Gondal poems are not only enjoyable to read, but also offer an insight into the creative world of the Brontë siblings. Through the theme, language, and style, we can glimpse images of English Romanticism and the Gothic. The sisters would have read the poems by William Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge, Percy B. Shelley, John Keats, and Lord Byron, who was considered quite a celebrity. Furthermore, the countless ghost stories and novels written in the vein of the Gothic genre, since Horace Walpole initiated his novel *the Castle of Otranto* in 1764, would have been accessible to them, as well.

*The North Wind* evokes a mysterious and imaginary world in which the power of nature and the natural elements reign free and unhindered. The poem presents an internal dialogue between the I-speaker of the poem and the personified Wind. Here, the god-like force of the Wind addresses the I-speaker (whose gender remains unknown throughout the poem), who is captive and confined in a cell. The I-speaker seems to “know it [the Wind] well” and understands the “language” of the Wind (Brontë 186). It is the Wind that provides a description of the “northern mountains” from an aerial view, which it describes as being “...free,/ still lonely, wild, majestic, bleak and drear,/And stern and lovely,” (186). The power of nature evokes a “joyous mountain child” who is now “pining in a dungeon” (200). The Wind brings memories of the “cherished land” and “mountain home” (219) to enable the I-speaker to unite with this powerful spirit. The aim of the Wind is to liberate this person from “despair” (219), whereby the concept of time loses its meaning and space becomes infinite. This poem is partially autobiographical as it pays tribute to the fun and imagination of Anne and Emily. The wind portrayed in the poem relates partly to the northern landscape of the Highlands, but also to their experiences of the winds of the Yorkshire moors, which was literally right behind and beyond their home in Haworth. Percy B. Shelley’s grand poem *Ode to the West Wind* (1820) could also be considered a possible source since both address the natural elements, specifically the wind, and emphasize its immense power and potential; however, the experiences here seem to diverge. *The North Wind* tends to view nature as a source of truth and authentic experience, which is how the first generation of Romantic poets, namely W. Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge, encountered the natural elements. Shelley’s poem, however, invokes not only the god-like power of the wind, but goes further and specifically connects nature with art to highlight the ultimate beauty within nature and the aesthetic experience this resonates. Despite the obvious youth of Anne’s Gondal poems, they share with Shelley’s work a vibrant and energetic creative interpretation of the natural landscape. Whether this reflects the Scottish Highlands, or the Yorkshire moors, it does not affect the tone, fluidity, and rhythm of the poem.

Nature’s moods and its wild and fully untouched form is one of the major attributes of Romanticism. In her poem *Bluebell* (1840), Anne Brontë recalls William Wordsworth’s well-known poem *I wandered lonely as a cloud* by highlighting nature and the natural scenery as a primary source for poetic inspiration. Anne Brontë began working as a governess in April 1840 at Thorp Green, near York in the Robinson family’s household. Accordingly, she may have accompanied the family on their yearly summer vacation to Scarborough in July. While there is no proof that she did go there that summer (Armitage “Bluebell”), the poem was written on the 22nd of August 1840 and contains references that “recall not long ago” an event during which “before me rose the lofty hill, behind me lay the sea” (Brontë 601). Compared to the previously examined poem, *The North Wind*, *Bluebell* consists of 12 quatrains with alternating rhymes (abcb) throughout. Furthermore, it focuses on a particular scenic landscape, which may be connected to the locality of Scarborough. The other particularity of the poem is the importance of flower symbolism, which was a way of communicating one’s thoughts and feelings in the Victorian era. Accordingly, the bluebell flower has various meanings, but the most well-known is “everlasting love and constancy,” as well as “humility or sometimes gratitude” (Auntyflo 2020). Humility then may also relate to the bell shape of the flower as it bows down on the flower spike (Auntyflo 2020).

The first two stanzas introduce a happy, playful tone, evocative of Wordsworth’s *I wandered lonely as a cloud*, whereby each bluebell is “fine” and “subtle” with “its own sweet feeling” and “silent eloquence” that fills the I-speaker’s “heart with bliss” (584). The third verse then moves back in time, “yet I recall not long ago” (584), as the I-speaker refers to leading a “toilsome life” (584). Armitage and Edward Chitham locate

this reference in the time Anne worked as a governess, work that she did not enjoy. As the memory continues, the happy and carefree tone provides a greater depth of acknowledgement of her natural surroundings in which the I-speaker sees “smiling flowers” and a “fair” scene (601). However, in the seventh stanza, the sight of a “trembling,” “single sweet bluebell” triggers a “rising in my throat;” through this emerge further memories of “happy childhood’s hours” (601).

The poem clearly uses a memory-within-a memory technique in describing “those sunny days of merriment/when heart and soul were free,/and when I dwelt with kindred hearts/that loved and cared for me” (601). This illustrates Anne’s longing for the home she left behind when she decided to accept the governess’ position. The last two stanzas, however, present an interesting alternative by providing references to the I-speaker’s present state: “heartless crowds,” “thankless life,” “anxious toil and strife” (639). The joy, happiness, and bliss that the I-speaker felt in the beginning is quickly dispersed with these references. Interestingly, these allusions are crucial since they help the contemporary researcher to understand Brontë’s sincere subjective recollections to her environment and the inspiration this gave the poet. In the final stanza, she calls herself the “sad wanderer” whom the bluebell instructs to “weep those blissful times/that never may return!” (639). Here, the concluding statement, an intricate alliteration, “it made me mourn” (639), is a far cry from the final Wordsworth-ian blissful memory. Rather, a melancholic state of being is evoked through the solitary “bluebell” in the final, concluding thought.

Both *The North Wind* and *The Bluebell* are appropriate examples of how vividly and emotionally Anne was able to write about nature. Through nature imagery, she offers an unachievable idyll and elicits responses from nature, which range from happiness and bliss to sorrow and melancholy. In the above examples, this occurs through the personified wind and the bluebell in which the reader is presented with a comparative view of the current and the ideal. These recall a sense of being separated from a beautiful ideal, resulting in loss, melancholy, or even mourning. Though this may sound dismal, one should not forget that Romanticism and Victorian poetry drew on the contradictory emotions of beauty and subjectivity for inspiration. The cultural reflections of the era inherently find their place in Anne Brontë’s poetry as well.

The poems, *To...* (1842) and *Night* (1845), offer a deeper, more intense, and personal approach in Anne Brontë’s poetry. According to Hay, as Anne grew older, she “began to move away from the sweeping, dramatic style of her Gondal poetry, towards a simpler approach. Her poetry became more intimate, more introspective, as she began to write about themes and ideas that were important to her” (Hay 781). The two poems, *To...* and *Night*, should be grouped together because they are credited as love-poems written to William Weightman, who was assistant curate to Patrick Brontë at Haworth’s St. Michael and All Angels’ church from August 1839 to August 1842 (“Weightman”). Further research highlights that “Charlotte referred to Weightman sighing softly as he sat opposite Anne in church and looking out of the corners of his eyes to win her attention. They may also have [enjoyed] each other’s company during Anne’s summer holidays of [that] year” (Harrison and Stanford 84–5).

*To...* is a deeply personal poem, which Chitham points out was not included in the 1846 volume of *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell*, nor was it published in the 1850 edition of poems edited by Charlotte. Furthermore, *To...*, the poem, is not included in reprints of *The Complete Poems of Anne Brontë*, such as the eBook volume cited in this article. In the 1850 edition that Charlotte re-edited, “Charlotte chose to include poems that emphasized Anne’s religious melancholy, her burdened heart, generally bleak outlook on life” (Hay 1618). Armitage also points out that “the poem has received little attention over the years, and its first publication only came in 1959 when it appeared in Ada Harrison’s biography *Anne Brontë – Her Life*” (Armitage “To...”).

Before taking a closer view of *To...* and *Night*, it is essential for the sake of clarification to elaborate briefly on Anne Brontë’s reference to some of her poems as “pillars of witness.” This phrase, according to Hay, refers to the “more personal of Anne’s poems” (781). Originally, this is found in her novel *Agnes Grey* in which Agnes explains her understanding of the power of poetry:

[...] we often, naturally, seek relief in poetry - , ... I still preserve those relics of past sufferings and experience, like pillars of witness set up in travelling through the vale of life, to mark particular occurrences. (Brontë 130)



These personal poems reflect Anne Brontë's development and growth as a young person and as a writer. Furthermore, as Hay points out, Anne's personal poems began "to focus more on realism and the daily observations she made of people and experiences" (654).

*To...* begins as an address to an unnamed someone, which undoubtedly gives the poem greater mystery. The poem is an honest and emotional poem in which the poet directly addresses her beloved as: "I will not mourn thee, lovely one,/Though thou art torn away" ("To..."). Separation, sadness through death, and untimely loss is the central theme of the poem. The loved one is likened to a "dazzling ray" whose "transient" life was "full as bright" which "knew no blight" ("To..."). And though his life was short he knew very little "sin and strife/nor much of pain and woe," instead his "brightest hopes were fixed above/And they shall know no blight" ("To..."). Endurance, love, and strength are relevant features that underpin the entire work. These highlight the I-speaker's inner turmoil as the poem states from the very beginning that "I will not mourn", then moves to the realization "and yet I cannot check my sighs" because his "angel smile", his touch, and voice have been silenced by "stern death" ("To..."). The last stanza then seals the frame structure by returning to the notion of mourning, which by now is seemingly decisive and announces that "I'll weep no more;" however, human frailty sets in with an anguished cry of "But O!" ("To..."). The final realization of the I-speaker is that "I still must mourn", because the "pleasures," possibly referring to marriage and happiness, are buried in the grave and "they will not return" ("To..."). The poem demonstrates immense strength, which is emphasized by the tone, rhythm, and language of the poem. The key phrases that define the I-speaker's determination and steadfastness are the initial phrase, "I will not mourn", and final statement, "I still must mourn" ("To..."). The concluding word, "must," conveys Anne's perseverance and enormous inner strength, and it contradicts the religious image of Anne that Charlotte created. The I-speaker of the poem is rooted in reality, and the sorrow presented is sincere; furthermore, there is a strong sense of fortitude that compels one to go on.

In "early" 1845, as noted by Anne Brontë, another poem was written that is, according to Brontë scholars, Weightman related in its topic and approach (Armitage "Night"). This short poem, titled *Night* and consisting of three stanzas with abab alternating rhymes, offers yet another honest approach to Anne's reality. This poem was written while Anne was still employed by the Robinsons as governess, during the time Anne's brother Branwell was having an affair with Mrs. Robinson. Whether Anne already knew of the affair or merely had her own suspicions is uncertain. Nevertheless, *Night* is a beautiful demonstration of Anne's "pillars of witness" and includes indirect references to William Weightman. The nature of Anne's relationship with Weightman has been a point of long-standing debate and though it never amounted to much, his unexpected death in 1842 seems to have affected Anne deeply. The poem draws a distinct parallel between night and day, where the night is the "silent hour of night" when "blissful dreams" emerge, and the day is associated with "solitude and woe" (Brontë *Complete Poems* 1667). Furthermore, night is traditionally the time for magic and the supernatural, a theme that is intricately woven into the fabric of the poem as it offers "hope and rapture" and "bliss" (1667). Through the dreams of the I-speaker, long-awaited desires visualize and "bring again the darling of my heart to me" (1667). Though not as easily discernible as in the poem *To...*, in which the sadness and pain of having lost a dear one may be acutely felt by the reader, the "darling of my heart" is an obvious reference to Weightman.

The two poems clearly reflect a deep personal loss. The theme of loss is more pronounced in *To...*, because it shows Anne's sincere emotions not necessarily for a beloved one, but according to Hay rather mourning a good friend gone too young (1013). Charlotte may have considered these unmasked obvious emotions too open, which is why this poem was not published anywhere until 1959. *Night* is lighter in tone and offers an alternative in its playful symbolism of night and day. Charm, magic, and dreams open a new dimension as well as an escape from the realities of day and the general harshness of life. There are no direct references to Weightman in the poem; rather, it contains allusions to his "voice," which "death has silenced long ago," and imagines one who "cold in the grave for years has lain" (1667). However, the last two lines state that "only dreams can bring again/The darling of my heart to me," which could possibly be read as a playful reflection of the magical qualities that the night and dreams possess and implies an affectionate yearning for another person's presence in general. However, if we consider this a personal reflection and combine it with biographical data, then the last two lines are a self-evident expression of

Anne Brontë's longing for her lost love, William Weightman. *To...* therefore is very sincere in its sorrow and the implication clearly defines who the addressee is, while *Night* is more obscure and places greater emphasis on the effects of dreams and magic. Furthermore, as it was not considered advantageous for a lady to openly express her affections for a man in the mid-nineteenth century, *To...* was not included in either the 1846 *Poems* edition of Curren, Ellis, and Acton Bell, nor the 1850 combined edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*. As previously mentioned, recent Brontë scholarship tends to agree, Juliet Barker and Adele Hay among others, that Anne was an excellent writer capable of writing "passionate love stories in her Gondal poems" (Hay 1046). Therefore, whether these poems were a source of the poet's imagination or true, their aim was to reveal the truth which may have been considered too controversial for a single woman of her time (Hay 1058).

Anne Brontë's poems are manifold in their reflections of her contemporary time and space. As illustrated, her nature poems, beginning with the Gondal poems, are lively and energetic, while her love poems offer an insight into the depths of her more personal feelings; they are her "pillars of witness." These poems are mere examples from her poetic oeuvre, but none so far give any hint of her religious beliefs. Still, Anne has been framed as the pious Brontë sister.

The fact that Anne Brontë was religious is true, and this has a lot to do with her father's position as a minister of the Church of England who tutored the children himself and obviously expected his children to study and know the Bible in depth. Religion therefore played a greater role in their lives than would have been credited for most people. There were "unique elements in Anne's life that affected her religious attitudes" (Hay 141), for example, her Aunt Branwell's influence, and her religious crisis while at boarding school. But one must not forget her Victorian upbringing and environment. As a young woman living in the early nineteenth century, she would have been expected to be religious, but not necessarily dull, sombre, and depressing. The poems examined so far offer glimpses of vivid, energetic, beautiful, emotional, and sincere reflections of her time and environment.

In April 1848, when *The Narrow Way* was written, she was finishing her second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and according to Armitage, the criticism that she and Emily were receiving for *Agnes Grey* and *Wuthering Heights* probably provoked Anne into writing this poem (Armitage "The Narrow Way"). Another problematic legacy that has survived concerning Anne was that she was the least ambitious of the Brontës. However, Anne was the only sister who sent two of her poems independently to a magazine for publication. *The Three Guides* was published in August 1848, while *The Narrow Way* appeared in December in *Frazer's Magazine* (Hay 1114). This certainly shows strength and independence and absolutely contradicts the myths that were artificially created around her persona, an opinion shared by recent Brontë scholars Juliet Barker, Adelle Hay, and Nick Holland. Thus, their aim is to "expose an Anne who is often far from [religious] melancholy" (Hay 2515).

*The Narrow Way* is mostly acknowledged as a hymn, and Chitham remarks that "as often in Anne's work, there is the feeling of a melody in the background, and this poem has become Anne's best-known hymn" (qtd in Armitage "The Narrow Way"). The poem was probably inspired by John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, an allegorical tale published in 1678. This work is regarded as an important work of religious English literature and was apparently cherished by the young Brontës (Hay 3629). The poem consists of ten four-lined stanzas with abab alternating rhymes throughout, which provide the impressive melodic tone and dynamic rhythm. The narrator of the poem advises right at the beginning to "believe not" that "the upward path is smooth"; it cautions the universal figure, "thou," to be attentive since to follow "the only road/unto the realms of joy" requires great strength and endurance (Brontë 3865). The "hopes" and "delights" that life may offer are to be found "amid the sternest heights" and these are the "sweetest flowerets" (3865). However, "arm, arm thee for the fight," because life is a battleground in which "he, that dares not grasp the thorn/should never crave the rose" (3881). The poem follows the dream sequence of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in which Christian must discard his sins, in the poem this is pride and lust, converse with angels, avoid lions, and get through the Slough of Despond (Hay 3645). The narrator stresses that the aim of life is "to labour and to love,/to pardon and to endure,/to lift thy heart to God above,/and keep thy conscience pure" (3898). But hope alone is not enough, because this can only be achieved if one is honest and sincere in their belief in God.

Hope, honesty, love (of God and life), and endurance are characteristic features that surface – even though the poet distances herself from the narrator – throughout Anne Brontë’s poetry, revealing an altogether dynamic personality. These characteristics continually arise in her poetry; consequently, when Anne was diagnosed with consumption in January 1849, her last known poem, originally untitled, gives even greater emphasis to the meanings of strength and hope for the future. The poem was published posthumously in the 1850 combined edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* and was appropriately titled *Last Lines* by Charlotte.

*Last Lines* is one of the poems that was heavily edited by Charlotte to create the lonely, religious, and pious image of Anne that has survived well into our present time. The original poem in its complete form is available on the Michael Armitage *Anne Brontë* webpage. Accordingly, the original version consists of 16 four-lined stanzas, whereas *The Complete Poems of Anne Brontë* volume, a copy of the 1850 edition, merely contains eight stanzas. The original manuscript shows that Anne began writing the poem on 7 January and wrote the first nine verses in pencil, which was, as noted by Armitage, rather unusual; moreover, “Edward Chitham suggests it may indicate she was feeling too ill to sit at her writing-desk where ink would be available” (Armitage “Last Lines”). The remaining seven verses were written in ink in “several stages over the following three weeks: it was completed on January 28” (Armitage “Last Lines”).

A major difference between the two versions is the addressee of the poem. In the original long version, the narrator addresses God as “Thou” and “Thee,” which is more direct and personal, whereas the 1850 edition omits these and replaces them with the word “God” in the original sixth and seventh stanza. Furthermore, in the original version, the sixth stanza “and Thou has fixed it well” is replaced with “and He has fixed it well” (Armitage “Last Lines,” qtd. in Brontë 3928). The original version acquires its strength from the honest and sincere personal anguish of the I-speaker, “A dreadful darkness closes in/On my bewildered mind” (Armitage), which will be the poet’s last “pillar of witness.” Charlotte’s edited version, however, cuts the first four verses completely and begins the poem with stanzas five to seven in which she alters various words, such as “amid” (Armitage, stanza 5, line 1) to “that with”; “labouring throng” (Armitage, stanza 5, line 3) to “busy throng”; and “breaking heart” (Armitage, stanza 6, line 3) to “bleeding heart.” Perhaps more drastic is the change “And bid me watch the painful night/And wait the weary day” (Armitage, stanza 7, lines 3–4) to “Thou bid’st us now weep through the night/And sorrow through the day,” which alters the original meaning while the change of “me” to “us” replaces its confident, personal edge with a dull, formal, and distanced approach. In the last four verses of the original version, the poet is hopeful and there is a strong belief in a recovery: “Whether thus early to depart/Or yet awhile to wait” (Armitage, stanza 14, lines 3–4) and “If Thou shouldst bring me back to life/More humbled I should be” (Armitage, stanza 15, line 3–4). The final stanza of the original version, “But, Lord, whate’er my future fate/So let me serve Thee now” (Armitage, stanza 16, line 3–4) reveals an Anne who is firm, direct, and confident in the face of uncertain circumstances. In the edited version however, the word “future” is omitted and “so” is changed to “Oh,” which evokes a humbler and pious impression of suffering which does not offer any possibility of a future. The result is that the strong, enduring, and hopeful Anne is reduced to a dull, sombre, pious, and insignificant young woman.

## Conclusion

The Brontë sisters were very close in many aspects, but also very different in their conception of their surrounding world. Their reflections of time and space differed in terms of education and determination. Contemporary Brontë scholarship is beginning to reveal that Anne was certainly the most independent and radical of the three sisters, since she spent 2 years at a boarding school studying with great intensity, was employed twice as a governess between 1839 and 1845, and had two poems published independently. Naturally, Charlotte also spent many years in school, Clergy Daughters’ School at Cowan Bridge, near Kirkby Lonsdale, Lancashire; later studied in Miss Wooler’s school at Roe Head, where she was offered a teaching position. However, Charlotte and Emily according to autobiographical data were unable to



maintain any jobs for long and tended to give in to rejection and melancholy easier than Anne. Hence, in the unedited versions of Anne's poetry, readers meet a determined and well-educated woman of her time, who "had a constant thirst for knowledge" (Holland 2167). And one who was "skilled at combining personal experience with imagination" (Hay 127). In many ways, she was ahead of her time and ultimately strove to bring to fulfilment her "humble scheme" (Holland 2128). The sincere and radical approach of Anne's literary works, therefore, contradict the fabricated legacy that has survived well into the twentieth century. Consequently, as Holland maintains, Anne Brontë's manifesto may be summed up in the following: "...to tell the truth at all costs, and to let the truth convey its own moral message to those who could hear it" (2128). She was concerned about the physical and spiritual welfare of others; that moral message was expanded in her novels and poetry. In her works, she was able to shed light on things that people did not want to talk about or acknowledge. She was certainly religious, like most people of her time, but not in the way that her sister Charlotte presented her. She had a profound belief in a loving God and the availability of universal salvation (Holland 2128).

The poems examined in the article highlight different stages of artistic development and personal reflection which Anne called the "pillars of witness." *The North Wind* and *Bluebell* are vivid and imaginative depictions of nature in the style of the English Romantics. *To...* and *Night* are intensely personal portrayals of love, loss, and mourning. However, *The Narrow Way* presents the poet's religious views based on an honest and sincere belief in God. And *Last Lines* is the final poem written by Anne Brontë, which portrays her moment of crisis in the face of death and acceptance. The poems are written in a simple, emotive language and convey subtle irony, realism, strength, hope, truth, and harmony. These poetic works portray a highly educated woman, who was a feminist in our modern understanding, a radical, honest, determined, and independent. As a result, she was "out of step" with her time, hence a myth, an artificial legacy, had to be created to protect her personal integrity.

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