

BECOMING ACTON BELL

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THIS DISCUSSION considers how Anne Brontë's juvenile productions—her poems and drawings executed before the age of nineteen—anticipate the themes and manner of her adult novels, published as the work of Acton Bell. In setting age nineteen as the upper boundary for her juvenilia, I choose an age somewhat earlier than we usually think of for juvenilia, because at age nineteen Anne in effect moved into the adult world by taking a job to support herself as a full-time governess for the Ingham family, moving away from home to educate children who were not her relatives. I do not mean to approach the juvenilia material in a teleological way, implying that Anne was developing toward a goal which we can now discern through the gift of hindsight. Rather, I want to examine what the surviving material objects—the juvenile drawings and poems—reveal, and then ask how these perspectives persist into the adult writings. When Laurie Langbauer and I team-taught a graduate course in Victorian juvenilia some years back, one of our key determinations by the end of the semester was that a creative child did not categorise her work as a child's work, but simply as the work of a literary or visual artist. From that perspective, I examine how Anne's juvenilia feeds into the mature novels. Even the term "mature novels" is somewhat nebulous in the context of Anne's juvenilia, because she wrote her two novels when she was only in her twenties, writing *Agnes Grey* (pub. 1847) when she was probably twenty-five and twenty-six, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (pub. 1848) the next year.

The principal drawback to my focus is the limited material available. Of Anne's thirty-seven known drawings, only eighteen were executed before she became the Ingham governess in 1839 and therefore represent what we may think of as her juvenilia. Of her fifty-nine known poems, only eight represent her work prior to her nineteenth birthday. So we have only eighteen drawings and eight poems to consider. She also wrote two Diary Papers that represent her thinking as a teenager, at ages fourteen and seventeen. Two others are putatively collaborative documents, but Emily actually wrote these, and Anne wrote two others when she was in her twenties.

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The positive aspect of this limited juvenile production is, of course, that we can readily cover the full canon of her juvenile creations, and I interpreted the material “things” of our journal’s special issue in terms of our material evidence for discussing Anne’s early drawings and poems. Another drawback to our study, however, is the paucity of information available about Anne’s life itself, so that we often lack biographical context and “things” that might illuminate the visual and literary works. While New Critics and contemporary formal critics may find this biographical lack an actual plus—there is less to ignore, less extraneous information to get in the way of critical analysis—students of juvenilia might find themselves wishing for more context. Acknowledging these limitations, I here consider the juvenile writings and drawings to think about what they reveal about Anne’s adult novels. In doing so, I’m preoccupied with “things” that she employed in her writing and visual art to convey meaning, such as trees and shrubberies in her early drawings, or birds and dogs.

As we all know, Charlotte’s published comments on Anne and her fiction imply that this oldest sister thought relatively little of her youngest sister’s work. Anne scarcely mattered to Charlotte as a novelist when Charlotte was so bent on salvaging Emily’s reputation and ensuring the continuing publication of *Wuthering Heights*. In her Biographical Notice published in the 1850 edition of her sisters’ novels, Charlotte memorably labeled the subject matter of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*—which Charlotte refused to republish—“an entire mistake,” elaborating that “nothing less congruous with the writer’s nature could be conceived” and that the novel’s preoccupation with an alcoholic, abusive husband arose from “slightly morbid” motives, deriving, Charlotte suggests, from Anne’s “near at hand” exposure to such behaviour (“Biographical Notice” 6). These hints invite us to consider that Anne’s subject matter was influenced by her brother Branwell’s dissolution, which is certainly so. But attention to Anne’s juvenilia suggests that her themes and her world view predated the most extremely disturbing behaviour of her brother and were early baked into her perceptions.

Both of her novels exhibit her steady concentration on moral behaviour and her belief that women were clearly responsible for teaching boys and men to behave ethically. In the earliest, *Agnes Grey* (1847), Agnes’ primary commitment as a governess is to teach her charges to be truthful, kind, and even noble. In the second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), Helen Huntingdon again focuses on teaching ethics and morality, this time concentrating on the constricted experience of English ladies which inhibits their ability to understand men, to assess, educate, and support their sons and husbands. In this instance, Anne specifically pursued her religious belief that true repentance can enable even the most confirmed sinner to achieve divine forgiveness. Anne’s alignment with this view, a Universalist belief that countered the prevailing Anglican tenet that confirmed sinners were doomed to eternal punishment, set her apart from many writers of her time and reinforced her idea that women were responsible to educate others to strive for goodness. Charlotte’s further description

of Anne as “naturally a sensitive, reserved, and dejected nature” (“Biographical Notice”) established a view of the youngest Brontë that has long prevailed, even though we know that of the four siblings who survived to adulthood, she seems to have navigated the world beyond Haworth more successfully than the others did. Her seventeen-year-old brother Branwell has been said to judge fourteen-year-old Anne to be “nothing, absolutely nothing.”¹

Ellen Nussey’s description, recorded in her “Reminiscences of Charlotte Brontë” published in the May 1871 issue of *Scribner’s Monthly*, focuses on Anne’s attractive physical appearance, overtly distinguishing her from her siblings. Nussey considered Anne the “prettiest” of the sisters. By concentrating on her looks, she connects Anne to feminine standards of beauty represented in the gift books and annuals familiar to the Brontës, thereby linking her to conventions of female beauty rather than to intellectual or aesthetic attainment, highlighting the “pretty” hair, with its “graceful curls,” her “lovely violet-blue eyes, fine penciled eyebrows, and clear, almost transparent complexion.” Nussey introduced this description of Anne’s prettiness in a way that ensured she would be judged an essentially benign figure throughout literary eternity as “dear, gentle Anne.” Though Nussey concentrated on physical details that made Anne “quite different in appearance from the others” (in Smith, *Letters* 1: 598), this opening characterisation as “dear, gentle Anne” underscores Anne’s femininity, her gentleness, as her defining characteristic. One purpose of this depiction may have been indirectly to connect Emily to the period’s feminine ideal, for Nussey represents Anne as Emily’s virtual “twin” (see Gérin, *Anne* 67–68). In this sense, Nussey was supporting Charlotte’s conspicuous endeavour, in her 1850 biographical account, to rescue Emily from charges of unfeminine coarseness. This notion of Anne’s gentleness develops two threads from Charlotte’s early accounts of Anne. One is that she always seemed physically delicate, eventually developing asthma that required her occasionally to use an inhaler to breathe; the other was young Charlotte’s recollection that she saw an angel standing by infant Anne’s cradle (Gérin, *Anne* 13).

It has now become routine in Anne Brontë criticism to oppose this notion of “gentle” Anne and to assess her as a bolder cultural critic than earlier reviewers thought. Recent critics are right—for all her gentleness and prettiness, Anne did not conform to literary and cultural stereotypes. Neither she nor her protagonists conformed to the period’s ideals of ladylike behaviour or the gendered suitability of literary themes. As Samantha Ellis has written in her unconventional recent study, *Take Courage: Anne Brontë and the Art of Life*, Anne was more radical than the time prized in a woman, and like her protagonist Helen Huntingdon had “to make a woman of herself” (9). As Anne wrote in her preface to the second printing (sometimes referred to as the second edition) of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, she rejected notions that ladylike decorum prevented candid depiction of human behaviour or prevented women from writing truth: “I am at a loss to conceive how a man should permit himself to write anything that would be really disgraceful to a woman, or why

a woman should be censured for writing anything that would be proper and becoming for a man” (31).

Scrutinising her juvenile poetry and drawings suggests that the strength and energetic cultural critique of her mature writing was already implicit, if not explicit, in her juvenilia. This discussion will suggest characteristics of Anne’s worldview, artistic renderings, and writings evident in her juvenile productions and in her novels as well. In studying the juvenilia, we will catch sight of young Anne Brontë becoming the novelist Acton Bell.



Figure 1. Detail from The Brontë Sisters, oil painting by Branwell Brontë, c. 1834. The National Portrait Gallery.

Before turning to Anne’s juvenile drawings and poems, however, we should pause to consider the image that has become perhaps the most famous visual representation of women writers of the nineteenth century: the portrait of the three Brontë sisters painted by Branwell c. 1834 (Figure 1)—and familiarly known as “the pillar portrait” because Branwell’s efforts to eliminate his self-portrait from the group has resulted in a vertical “ghost” between the images of Emily and Charlotte (on the right). Though we should remember that Branwell, only seventeen years old, lacked training and that details we observe may trace to his lack of skill rather than to his intention, we can nonetheless observe that the image invites us to think of the sisters as more or less the same age, for Anne does not really look like the fourteen-year-old she was at this time. The image makes us think of the sisters as a group of girls about the same age, although Emily was eighteen months older than Anne, and Charlotte was Anne’s senior by four years. I emphasise this age difference to remind us all that Anne was always the baby sister, the youngest in a group of precocious artists. She

therefore must have experienced the world differently from the way her older sisters did, and they in turn considered her less mature. In addition, as Roslyn Jolly commented at the recent juvenilia conference when we discussed this portrait, Anne's facial expression does not suggest the sweetness and gentleness emphasised by Nussey's description. Even at the young age of fourteen, she looks like a serious-minded social critic rather disdainful of human behaviour.

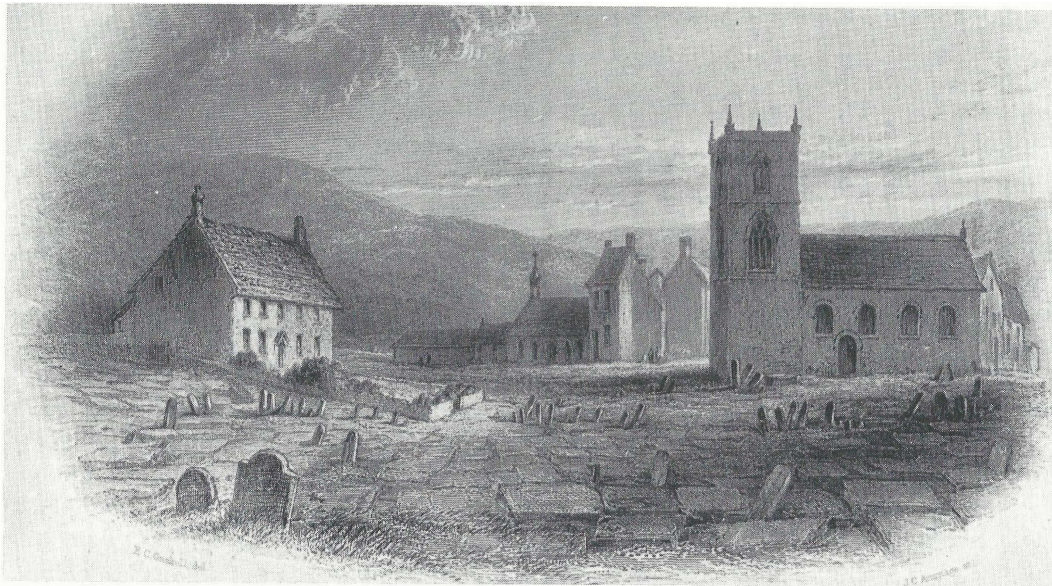
ORIGINALITY is not much evident in Anne's early drawings, for like many girls of the period, she seems to have learned drawing primarily by copying plates from books and magazines. Even so, we can conjecture much about her artistic approach from these early forays into art. Her earliest work comprises six tiny sketches. The first one exhibited by Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars in their groundbreaking study *The Art of the Brontës* (396, #332) shows a portion of a church with a steeple, surrounded by trees within a churchyard defined by a low stone wall. Dated August 29, 1828, when Anne was just eight years old, the drawing is remarkably proficient for so young an artist (Figure 2). The second drawing included in this first grouping, this one dated 7 April 1829, with similar care renders a cottage with a gabled wing and a chimney, surrounded by embracing trees and hedges, copied from a "tail-piece" in Bewick's *History of British Birds* (Figure 3; Alexander & Sellars 396, #333). Whereas Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* alludes to images from Bewick such as the corpse of a hanged man, imagery consonant with the somewhat Gothic character of Charlotte's first published novel, Anne's sketch represents ordinary life, much as Anne's first novel *Agnes Grey* would do.



Figures 2 and 3: Anne Brontë, pencil drawing of a church surrounded by trees, 1828 (left). Anne Brontë, pencil drawing of a cottage with trees, 1829 (right). Brontë Parsonage Museum.

Interestingly, though both these edifices sketched by Anne—church and country cottage—seem to represent ordinary reality, they do not represent Anne's actual experience of her parsonage home or the Haworth church where her father served as

perpetual curate. A feature common to both architectural drawings gives some insight into what would have attracted Anne to such buildings and their surroundings, for both church and cottage in her sketches are enfolded by abundant trees and hedges. In contrast, early nineteenth-century photographs and engravings of the Haworth church and parsonage show both structures to be austere: bare, exposed to the elements and exposed to human scrutiny (see Figure 4). The church, dating from the eighteenth century with a much older tower, sits at the top of the small town’s steep hilly main street, and it as well as the parsonage—now the Brontë museum—are visible to the community below. Whereas Emily seems to have dreaded public scrutiny—perhaps morbidly, to the point of a kind of agoraphobia—Anne in her lifetime did not register a comparable degree of dread of public scrutiny, though she seems to have been shy and introspective, very quietly sociable. While we may judge that Anne was merely faithfully copying images for both her earliest sketches, we can recognise details that likely drew her to copy such representations. Given Haworth’s high mortality rate, its low life expectancy of just under twenty-six years (Alexander and Smith 236), and its tainted water supply about which Anne’s father Patrick repeatedly contacted authorities in London (see Barker 437, 635, 672; and Fraser 23), the appeal of sheltered edifices implying protection and comfort seems clear.



Mrs Elizabeth Gaskell, ‘Haworth Church and Parsonage’, 1857

Figure 4. *Haworth Church and Parsonage*, from Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857).

In this sense, her early sketches reveal her predilection for a sharp contrast to the exposure of the Haworth parsonage, an exposure akin to the deplorable public scrutiny that Anne details in her second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. From the outset Anne introduces that novel's preoccupation with invasive gossip. Initially Helen Huntingdon, new to the neighborhood, needs to keep her identity secret in order to cover her transgression of English law, for she has left her abusive, alcoholic husband and against the law taken away their son without his father's permission. Her new neighbors insistently quiz her for details of her backstory and former home. Later, slanderous gossip exposes the innocent Helen to poisonous, false imputations of sexual liaisons. This corrosive false gossip reveals the worst aspects of intrusive everyday society. In the novel Acton Bell introduces this theme by describing the house, Wildfell Hall itself, as exposed and unprotected—rather like Haworth Parsonage. An old, dilapidated heap, the mansion sits atop “the loftiest eminence in our neighbourhood, where ... the hedges, as well as the trees, become scanty and stunted.” “Cold and gloomy” in its “unsheltered situation,” shielded only “by a group of Scotch firs, themselves half blighted with storms” (45), the Hall represents the gloomy situation of the novel's protagonist, exposed to the prying eyes and discrediting imaginations of conventional, narrow-minded neighbors.

In the Brontës' lifetimes, the parsonage was closely bounded on the east by a very full graveyard, where some 44,000 burials had occurred (Alexander and Smith 238), and the church grounds were essentially treeless. When the Brontës lived in the parsonage, as Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith observe in their *Oxford Companion to the Brontës*, although “a perimeter wall surrounded the house, front garden, and backyard, and small trees and bushes bordered the garden ... there were no tall trees” (Alexander and Smith 238–40). A friend of Elizabeth Gaskell remarked that the house had “not a tree to screen it from the cutting wind” (Wilson 102).

None of the photos surviving from the mid-nineteenth century suggests the protective enfolding visible in Anne's early sketches. So we can conjecture from young Anne's first drawings that she was attracted to images of edifices comfortably embraced by ample trees and vegetation enfolding and protecting them, and at the same time beautifying the manmade structures. Anne's images represent a sense of abundance, plenty, amplitude, comfortable excess, in the surrounding natural growth, a kind of protection and nurturance not evident in images of the bare parsonage where she grew up. Moreover, the contrast between photos of Haworth parsonage and the images that young Anne chose to copy hint at her feeling of exposure in her youth, a feeling of being observed and criticized by a community, of being judged, feelings perhaps natural to members of a minister's family living in a small town, and also perhaps natural to the youngest child in a family with three older siblings, a watchful father and aunt, as well as several servants. The familiar story of Mr Brontë providing his children with a mask to encourage their candour in answering his questions reminds us also that little Anne (about four at the time of this episode) would normally not have had the benefit of such a disguise (Fraser 31). In the earliest

Diary Paper penned by Emily as their joint production when Anne was fourteen, Anne responds to her aunt’s query, “where are your feet Anne” by answering “on the floor” (Alexander with Swann 4). Her response suggests that perhaps she tended to curl up in an unladylike posture, or to soil furniture with her shoes, and emphasises her unfeminine practice of sitting with her feet propped on the fireplace, behaviour being monitored by her beloved Aunt Branwell, with whom she shared a bedroom for some twenty years. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* seems to develop a dread of exposure to criticism manifest in Anne’s girlhood and partly expressed through her earliest architectural and landscape sketches with their opulent protective greenery.

To turn from Anne’s early sketches to her writings, the context we know best for Anne’s youthful productions is her joint creation with Emily of the Gondal saga, stories that they produced over years, beginning perhaps as early as Anne’s eleventh year. Because no manuscripts of these tales are known to be extant, we must piece together the Gondal works from slender evidence (see, e.g. Fannie Ratchford’s *Gondal’s Queen*), which includes the poems the two sisters wrote to convey and amplify the Gondal story, poems attributed to characters in the tales, often as dramatic monologues. Evidence also includes references in the Diary Papers written by Anne and Emily, lists of characters and places left by Anne, and details from their known biography. We know, for example, that when Anne and Emily traveled to York on the train in July 1845, they played the roles of figures from Gondal escaping from the Palace of Instruction (*Diary Papers* 21–22). This phenomenon is rather surprising: women aged twenty-five and twenty-six and a half while traveling away from home pretending to be literary characters they have invented. Such travel was an unusual event in their lives, an experience when we might expect young women to be absorbed by places and people they are meeting in a real world beyond their relatively restricted experience. We know, however, that Emily had in effect shrunk from her earlier travels for schooling at Roe Head and in Belgium, whereas Anne at least withstood the stresses of transplantation more robustly. We also know that Anne loved travel to Scarborough so much that she chose to return to the seaside town when she was dying, and was subsequently buried there. Anne’s references to this journey to York imply a degree of embarrassment about their pretense and performance and suggest that Anne was essentially trying to support Emily’s desires rather than her own.²

On their journey to York, Emily seems to have taken refuge from this wider world in their imaginary kingdom, which represented a lifelong involvement with characters and events of their own making. Emily seems to have been the leader in this role-playing, with Anne supporting Emily’s desire to play act. If we look at Anne’s Diary Paper of 1845, written in the year of their trip, when Anne was twenty-five and Emily twenty-six and a half, Anne expresses her interest in knowing more about the life of their character Julius Brenzaida and events in Gondal that Emily was then narrating in her history of the emperor’s life. As Anne wrote, Emily “has read some

of it and I want very much to hear the rest—she is writing some poetry too I wonder what it is about” (*Diary Papers* 26). Ellen Nussey may have sent biographers and critics down a rabbit hole by representing Anne and Emily “in unison like dearly attached twins,” suggesting they were mirror images of each other, when in fact Emily was the older sister by eighteen months and Anne the younger, agreeable and perhaps worshipful baby sister.

This Diary Paper implies that in creating the characters and events of Gondal, Anne was not in charge or even an equal partner; she did not even know the events Emily was inventing. She did, however, respect Emily’s creativity, and therefore provided her elder sister with an admiring audience, perhaps a role even more significant than that of collaborator. Although Emily began her Diary Paper of 1834, when Anne was fourteen, by juxtaposing the everyday life of the parsonage kitchen (the sisters helping to prepare food and a servant washing in the back kitchen) with the imagined explorations taking place in Gaaldine (*Diary Papers* 4), we cannot assume that Anne similarly blended the real and the imagined. In Anne’s Diary Paper of 1841, written some seven years later when she was twenty-one, she likewise begins with extensive reporting of life’s realities of the moment: she discusses the uncertainty of the sisters’ plan to set up a boarding school, each sister’s experience as a governess and Branwell’s replacing his plans to be a professional painter with work as a tutor and a railroad clerk. She foregrounds transitoriness—the replacement of beloved servant Tabby by Martha Brown, the loss and death of pets (we “got a sweet little cat and lost it” and “got a wild goose which has flown away and 3 tame ones[,] one of which has been killed”). In this context of unanticipated changes, she wonders “What will the next 4 years bring forth? Providence only knows—But we ourselves have sustained very little alteration since” the time of the last Diary Paper. “I have the same faults that I had [four years ago] only I have more wisdom and experience and a little more self possession than I then enjoyed. How will it be when we open this paper and the one Emily has written—? I wonder whether the Gondalians will still be flourishing and what will be their condition—” This juxtaposition implies that Emily may remain absorbed by Gondal. The next sentence about Anne could imply that she, too, is stuck in their imaginary kingdom: “I am now engaged writing the 4th volume of Sofala Vernon’s life”—though Anne goes on to anticipate that the next four years will mark “a sort of era in my existence” (*Diary Papers* 17–19). In other words, Emily may still inhabit Gondal, but Anne will likely have begun a new chapter in life. Writing at twenty-five, Anne remarks that “we have not yet finished our Gondal Chronicles that we began three years and a half ago when will they be done?” She wraps up discussion by remarking that “The Gondals are at present in a sad state The Gondals in general are not yet in first rate playing condition—will they improve?,” and she concludes the paper by wondering about the Brontës’ real-life situation four years hence, when “Emily will be just 30 I shall be in my 29th year” (*Diary Papers* 27). Together, all Anne’s comments may suggest that she is less wedded to the tales of Gondal than Emily is, that they in fact weary her.

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“Things”

The eight poems of her girlhood not only elaborated the Gondal story but also anticipated Anne’s mature novels. Her earliest known poem “Verses by Lady Geralda,” written in 1836 (when she was sixteen), expresses the desolation of a woman who has lost her entire family and finds sadness in all aspects of nature that formerly delighted her. Yet she is invigorated by the possibility of beginning anew in another place:

But the world’s before me now,
Why should I despair?
I will not spend my days in vain,
I will not linger here!” (ll. 81–84, *Poems* 51).

Only exertion, rising to meet new challenges, will rekindle her hopefulness:

From such a hopeless home to part
Is happiness to me,
For nought can charm my weary heart
Except activity. (ll. 97–100)

In this situation we can see the kernel of both of Acton Bell’s novels. Anne’s second poem, written some eighteen months later, narrates the parting and reunion of two adolescent lovers, “Alexander and Zenobia.” Detailing their separation, it concludes quickly, with happy energy: “The lonely well bursts on his sight / And they are met at last!” (ll. 273–74, *Poems* 59). (See Roslyn Jolly’s discussion of this poem in the following essay.) Written only four months later (when Anne was seventeen), “A Voice from the Dungeon,” figuratively resumes the story of Zenobia by presenting the pathetic situation of Marina Sabia, separated from her beloved son and his father, her lover. Here representing herself as a captive in a dungeon, Marina anticipates the sense of imprisonment that Anne would ascribe to both Agnes Grey, in a class-based society where she has no power, and to Helen Huntingdon, whose class and gender subject her legally to the whims of her drunken brute of a husband.

Except for the second poem, which concludes lamentation with an abrupt happiness, all of the poems Anne wrote by 1839 mourn the loss of joy experienced by women who have previously known love and happier times. By elaborating this sense that women are prisoners of society’s—especially men’s—control, Anne developed her critique of the limited educations allowed to mid-nineteenth-century ladies. In sum, attributes of her juvenilia, both visual and poetic, lead to the two novels in which Anne Brontë represents the limitations experienced by women. Overly protected in their families and kept ignorant of the ways of the world, they were poorly equipped to deal with the worst in human nature. Controlled by laws that enforced dependency and prevented them from asserting maternal rights, they

remained like the numerous speakers in Anne's juvenile poems—prisoners. Though not held in dungeons, they suffered cultural imprisonment. As a wife to a wealthy brute, Helen Huntingdon in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* writes, “I am a slave, a prisoner” (373). Women in most of Anne's teenage poems stand behind this declaration.

Though we lack the prose story that Anne and Emily may have written as connective tissue for the dramatic utterances of their Gondal figures, the poems themselves stir us partly because they use first-person utterances, a perspective that young Anne mastered in her early poetry and would use effectively in her two novels. In several of Anne's early poems we see the development of her mastery of literary forms. A compelling feature of Anne's early poetry is her use of first-person point of view. She astutely employed conventions of what would—also in the 1830s and early 1840s—become the dramatic monologue, assigning speaking roles to her characters and thereby enlisting readers' sympathy and capitalizing on the emotional power of characters' circumstances. The first-person narration of her first novel *Agnes Grey* displays the wisdom of this choice, which Anne further complicates in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by having two narrators, each directly expressing their emotional responses to situations by writing their stories from their individual perspectives: Gilbert Markham in a letter to his brother-in-law, and Helen Huntingdon in a diary that she gives to Gilbert. It is possible that Anne's gifted oldest sister Charlotte learned something about writing from Anne's first novel, which she heard read aloud and saw in manuscript before its publication, for the power of first-person narration is evident in Charlotte's best novels, *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, while the third-person accounts in *The Professor* and *Shirley* fail to achieve the intensity of her first-person works.

Finally, I return to Anne's early sketches to think about her representation of people through their relationships with animals. Among her early sketches, we find a detailed drawing of a magpie standing on a rock, executed in 1829, when she was nine, copied from a tail piece in Bewick (Alexander and Sellars 96-97, #334). From the Diary Papers we know that animals were significant companions in the Brontë household. The sisters bonded with birds and dogs in particular. In her first novel Anne establishes her heroine's gentle kindness by showing her bidding farewell to the family's pet pigeons, whom they have trained to eat from their hands (13). In contrast, at her first posting as a governess, her new pupil Tom reports proudly that he has laid traps for birds he intends to eat after torturing them—like the nestlings he tormented the previous summer, whose wings and heads he pulled off (22). All these references to birds anticipate the most shocking event in the novel, when generally demure, non-assertive Agnes abruptly with a rock smashes five nestlings in a nest to prevent Tom from torturing them as he plans (48-49). In this first novel Anne memorably uses birds to establish Agnes Grey's ethical standards and her horribly limited means of restraining the sadistic behaviour of the boys she teaches. Her uncharacteristic violence, set against Agnes's own inclination instead to love and nurture, definitively establishes her opposition to the boy's careless cruelty and forcefully critiques Agnes's

constraints as a governess expected to inculcate values and civil behaviour in her young charges without the authority to otherwise limit or punish their excesses.

Anne’s attachment to animals registers in numerous incomplete drawings she made of her King Charles spaniel Flossy, given to her by the Robinson family at her second posting as a governess when she was twenty. (So none of these images is juvenilia, and her concerns with Branwell’s situation likely caused her not to finish them.) Anne’s juvenile pencil drawings at least once feature a dog to complete a pencil drawing of bucolic fulfillment, an image from 1836 of a man with a dog before a villa (Alexander and Sellars 403, #345). As Acton Bell the novelist, Anne integrated dog companions into *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, in which Gilbert’s dog Sancho becomes his principal means of attracting Helen’s young son Arthur to him, and Gilbert further secures young Arthur’s attachment by giving him one of Sancho’s puppies. In her first novel, Anne concisely suggested the limitations of some characters by indicating their casual cruelty to a small wire-haired spaniel, Snap, who chooses Agnes as his favourite, a detail that Edward Weston remembers when he establishes his moral superiority to most men in the novel by rescuing the dog from a rough life with the local rat-catcher. The dog’s affection for both Agnes and Weston brings them together for the novel’s resolution, the marriage that rewards Agnes for her patient goodness throughout the novel.

The attention to detail in Anne’s sketches is both her chief talent as a visual artist and a distinctive quality of her prose. We see this talent in her early sketches of trees, an oak and an elm, both drawn when she was fifteen (Alexander and Sellars 398–99, #337 and #338), and again in her focus on Helen Huntingdon’s attention to detail in her paintings. Early in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* this woman artist—the first professional woman artist represented as a protagonist in English fiction—studies and sketches “the distinctive characters of the different varieties of trees in their winter nakedness” (74). Soon afterwards, Helen remarks that studying the beautiful details in nature interferes with her pleasure, for “instead of delivering myself up to the full enjoyment of [the delightful touches of nature] ... I am always troubling my head about how I could produce the same effect upon canvas; and as that can never be done, it is mere vanity and vexation to the spirit” (105-06). Anne Brontë thereby asserts her own sense of responsibility to represent Nature’s beauties in her art.

Attention to the beauty of landscapes animates *Agnes Grey*, too. At the end of this earlier novel the protagonist sets off for a solitary walk on the beach at a quarter to six in the morning, not expecting to meet anyone she knows. The beauty and power of the ocean impress her:

... no language can describe the effect of the deep, clear azure of the sky and ocean, the bright morning sunshine on the semicircular barrier of craggy cliffs surmounted by green swelling hills, and on the smooth, wide sands, and the low rocks out at sea ... and above all, on

the brilliant sparkling waves. And then, the unspeakable purity and freshness of the air! there was just enough heat to enhance the value of the breeze, and just enough wind to keep the whole sea in motion, to make the waves come bounding to the shore, foaming and sparkling, as if wild with glee (196–97).

This gleeful moment leading to the romantic fulfillment of the novel’s heroine reminds me of the first picture extant from Anne Brontë’s adult phase. Just six months after she began working as a governess, Anne at age nineteen drew a picture that seems likely to derive from her own imagination rather than from just copying a print or engraving (Alexander and Sellars 406, #350). This picture, representing “Woman gazing at a sunrise over a seascape,” dated 13 November 1839, portrays a young woman before whom the world and the day open to infinite possibilities. In an emblem of possible new beginnings, the rays of sunrise beckon her (Figure 6).

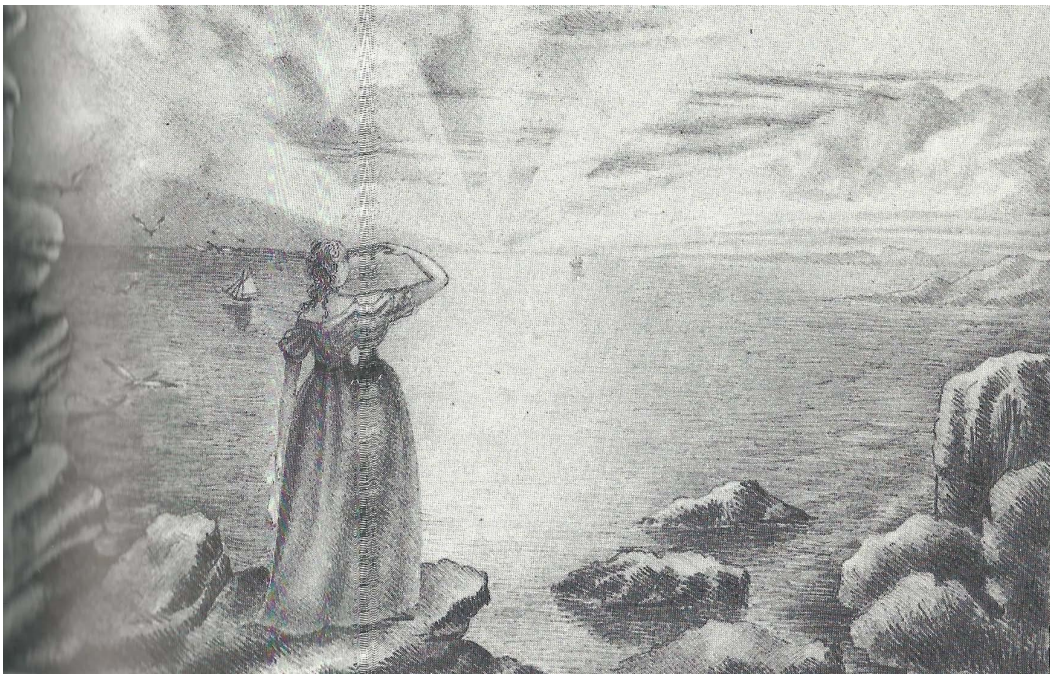


Figure 6: Anne Brontë, pencil drawing of a woman gazing at a sunrise over a seascape, 1839. Brontë Parsonage Museum.

Though the state of Anne’s lungs predetermined that her venture into the world beyond Haworth would be sadly brief, her literary excursion as a novelist into previously unexplored territory of women’s lives left two striking monuments to the boldness of Acton Bell. As we have seen with reference to surviving material artifacts, both novels developed aspects of her literary and visual juvenilia.

NOTES

- ¹ This judgment requires considerable unpacking, for Charlotte initially wrote the phrasing, attributing it to her Angrian character Lord Charles Albert Florian Wellesley, author of a satiric sketch of Branwell as the character Patrick Benjamin Wiggins. Branwell, rather than Anne, is the target of the satire. See “My Angria and the Angrians,” by Lord C. A. F. Wellesley, 14 October 1834, in *Edition of the Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*, Volume II, Part 2, 250. We have no other evidence that either Charlotte or Branwell assessed Anne as “nothing.” The statement is repeated later in *Gérin*, without contextual explanation, as though Branwell had written it (*Branwell* 82).
- ² In conversation Christine Alexander supplied the apt word *embarrassed* to describe Anne’s comments. Fannie Ratchford observes that Anne’s 1845 remarks on their Gondal work revealed “weariness and depression,” whereas Emily’s expressed “gusto” (Ratchford, *Gondal’s Queen* 164, 163). See Emily’s and Anne’s 1845 *Diary Papers* 21–22, 26–27.

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