

# **A Vain Talent?**

The Question of Female Artistry in  
the Life and Work of Anne Brontë

Edited by

**Taten Shirley**

*Faulkner University*

Series in Literary Studies



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# Introduction

Anne Brontë was born in Thornton in West Yorkshire, England, on January 17, 1820, as the youngest child to Patrick and Maria Brontë. Unfortunately, her birth year meant that her bicentennial would fall in 2020, the year the COVID-19 pandemic began. In 2016 and 2018, Brontë fans had fully celebrated both Charlotte and Emily with conferences, programs, and highlighted focuses at the Parsonage Museum in Haworth. This anthology arose from a conference session focused on Anne Brontë that was originally scheduled for November 2020 and was intended to celebrate her bicentennial. Organizers postponed it three times before it finally occurred in March 2022. While the focus remained appreciated, it had lost its timeliness. The fact that the pandemic disrupted Anne's celebration is regrettably fitting when one considers her historical treatment compared to her sisters'. As of now, a substantial amount of research on Anne exists, so perhaps we may dispense with Anne's title as the "forgotten" or "neglected" Brontë sister. However, biographies and literary criticism continue to underrepresent her, even in the twenty-first century. The last chapter of this anthology deals with this neglect more fully.

Those who have studied Anne's works and her life know that she was not only a writer. She was also an artist. All of the Brontë children were extremely creative and enjoyed sketching and painting in addition to their storytelling and games. Yet, it is only Anne who employs artistry as a crucial element to a character's fate in one of her novels, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and while most of the chapters in this anthology focus on *Tenant*, other chapters consider artistry in her poetry, in *Agnes Grey*, and personal artistry as an author.

This anthology's main goal is to aid Brontë scholars, along with undergraduate and graduate students alike, in their research of Anne Brontë, specifically in regards to the question of her artistry in her own life and the theme of artistry in her novels and her poetry. The first chapter examines the artistry of Anne's poetry and how it can be viewed as therapeutic for her homesickness while at Thorp Green. The second chapter focuses on the artistry of education in *Agnes Grey* and how the limited authority of a governess restricts her ability to utilize education as an aesthetic expression. Next, Chapter Three considers both *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (as well as *Wuthering Heights* and

*Shirley*) through the medieval lens of chivalric domestic violence, demonstrating how the tradition of courtly love can be dangerous and how art can be the weapon with which women in these texts can defend themselves. The fourth chapter explores the question of representation of Helen as an artist in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Chapter Five details how *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* demonstrates the ways in which artistry could empower women to exist independently of men. Then the sixth chapter discusses female artistry in the Victorian Age, particularly sketching and painting in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Jane Eyre*, to female authorship in the nineteenth century. Chapter Seven explores the use of art as a means of escape from an unvirtuous marriage in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Lastly, the closing chapter examines the artistry of Anne's authorship by contrasting the supernatural in Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* to the realism in Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. These collected works strive to demonstrate how the examination of the theme of artistry in Anne Brontë's life and work serves to cement her place among the great nineteenth-century authors.

Chapter 1

# A Study of the Thorp Green Poems of Anne Brontë: Poetic Artistry as a Cure for Her Nostalgia

Yağmur Sönmez-Demir

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## Abstract

Among the Brontë Sisters, Anne Brontë is the least studied, and the bulk of literary scholarship is on her novels. Most of the critics agree on the fact that her literary production is autobiographical. Taking my cue from the existing scholarship on Anne Brontë, I will study the poems Anne wrote when she was employed as a governess in Thorp Green by the Robinsons between 1840 and 1845. Highly influenced by the romantic poets preceding her, she shared her emotions in her poems. As her biographers (Gérin, Chitham, Langland) also noted, she felt excluded and lonely, especially at the start of her employment in Thorp Green, and she was able to visit her family only on Christmas and two weeks in June each year, which led her to develop a longing for her home and her family. An exhaustive study of her Thorp Green poems displays that she dislikes being there, experiences homesickness, and longs for the past days. With the exception of Gondal and religious poems written at that time span, she expresses her loneliness, solitude, and feelings of melancholy in the poems. When her homesickness heightened, she found solace in her memories and turned her feelings of longing into poetic creation. She either draws on her memories about her home in Haworth or uses objects in nature, such as a flower or a scenery as memorative signs to trigger her memories. According to sociologist Svetlana Boym, nostalgia can be “a poetic creation, an individual mechanism of survival, a countercultural practice, a poison, or a cure” (Boym 18). In this study, I will read Anne Brontë’s Thorp Green Poems through the prism of theories of nostalgia, and argue that she wrote poems in order to deal with her nostalgia, for which her poetic creation becomes a cure.

**Keywords:** Anne Brontë, Thorp Green poems, memory, nostalgia

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Several literary critics agree with the claim that Anne Brontë's literary production is autobiographical, and her biographers, such as Gérin, Chitham, and Langland, also note that she felt excluded and lonely, especially at the start of her employment at Thorp Green. She was able to visit her family only on Christmas and for two weeks in June each year, which led her to develop a longing for her home and her family. Drawing on the existing scholarship on Anne Brontë, this chapter examines the poems Anne wrote when she was employed as a governess at Thorp Green by the Robinsons between May 1840 and June 1845. Highly influenced by the romantic poets preceding her, she shared her emotions in her poems. An exhaustive study of her Thorp Green poems, with the exception of Gondal and religious poems, displays that she dislikes being there, experiences homesickness, and longs for the past days. In the poems written during that time span, she expresses her loneliness, solitude, and feelings of melancholy. When her homesickness heightened, she found solace in her memories and turned her feelings of longing into a poetic creation. She either draws on her memories of her home in Haworth or uses objects in nature, such as a flower or a view, as memorative signs to trigger her memories. According to sociologist Svetlana Boym, nostalgia can be "a poetic creation, an individual mechanism of survival, a countercultural practice, a poison, or a cure."<sup>1</sup> Taking this quote as a springboard, this chapter reads Anne Brontë's Thorp Green poems through the prism of theories of nostalgia, and argues that she wrote poems in order to deal with her nostalgia, for which her poetic creation becomes a partial cure.

Poetry is perhaps among the oldest of the art forms, so much so that it has been used to define other artistic fields, such as poetry of architecture, poetry of music, and poetry of painting. According to Hegel, poetry "is the art which can exhaust all the depths of the spirit's whole wealth" and therefore, it is superior to painting and music, and "in order to maintain itself as genuine poetry it must always put these sister arts in the background, purely as its servants."<sup>2</sup> Poetry is frequently defined as "the essence of all art forms,"<sup>3</sup> as well as an art form in its own right. It has always been a means of expressing ideas, thoughts, and feelings, albeit it has assumed various styles and forms. At the turn of the nineteenth century, William Wordsworth underlined the role of the emotions in poetic creation and touched upon one of the functions

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<sup>1</sup> Svetlana Boym, "Nostalgia and Its Discontents," *The Hedgehog Review* 9, no. 2 (2007): 18.

<sup>2</sup> Georg W. F. Hegel, "Hegel's Lectures on Aesthetics" Part 3, Section 3 Accessed Feb 2, 2023 on <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/ae/part3-section3-chapter3.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Michael Bright, "The Poetry of Art," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 46, No. 2 (1985): 277.



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