

BRANWELL AND FRIENDS

A presentation given at the meeting on 5th August 2017.

The scene is the Black Bull. It is a year since Branwell died and several of those who knew him have assembled to share their memories of him.

PATRICK BRONTË

As you all know, my son requested that his burial be a private family affair, with no eulogy. But he also intimated that twelve months after he was in his grave I should assemble a certain group of his family and friends to have a drink in his honour, and to reminisce about his life.

Little did I realise when I buried Branwell that one year later I would have lost Emily and Anne too. So all there is left of my family are just Charlotte and myself.

So here we are in the snug of the Black Bull. At Branwell's request, I have summoned Charlotte's good friend Ellen Nussey who had also known Branwell through many of our happier years, and four of Branwell's friends – John Brown the sexton, Francis Grundy from the railways, Joseph Leyland the sculptor and William Dearden a poet friend.

And with some difficulty we have managed to persuade Lydia Robinson – now Lady Scott – to join us. We will pass over the inappropriateness of Branwell's love for her when he was at Thorp Green. But when I put it to Lady Scott that it was one of Branwell's dying wishes for her to be present, she graciously agreed to come.

Clearly I knew Branwell for all of his too short life. Our family held out such bright prospects for what he would achieve in this world, but alas, he had much talent in several fields but was too severe a critic of his own worth and held back rather than pushed through difficulties. As you know his last years were difficult ones and we had to watch helplessly as his body and soul underwent a gradual degeneration. But I am happy to report that in his final days he was able to turn his mind to the state of his soul, and found comfort in our Lord's arms. And now the weary are at rest. Let me call upon his sister Charlotte to say some words about her dear departed brother.

CHARLOTTE BRONTË

I don't remember when Branny was born because I was only just over a year old. Probably Maria, my oldest sister, might have remembered his birth because she was just over three. As the eldest she was the one who, a few years later, taught Branny his letters. She also made Branny fold his hands to say his prayers.

Even at a young age, Branny only had to be told things once and he could repeat it exactly, even a week later. I've often wondered if someone one day

could invent a special sort of paper that you could hold up to a scene and a permanent picture would stay on the paper. Well Branwell's memory was like that.

Father taught him Latin and Greek, as well as all the other things he taught us girls. Branny and I invented a game, called the Young Men's Play. When he was nine, father bought him a box of twelve toy soldiers to replace some that he'd lost. We each chose a soldier, even including Emily and Anne, and made up a story about them.

I remember, one day, father brought out a mask and one by one he asked us questions. For example, when he asked me what was the best book in the world, naturally I said the Bible. And when he asked me what the next best book was, I answered "the book of Nature". I thought that was really clever.

Branwell was asked what is the best way of knowing the difference between the intellects of men and women. He said, "by considering the difference between them as to their bodies." He then made a picture of a woman's body with his hands, which I thought was a naughty thing to do. Boys should never refer to a woman's body. Branwell was often naughty, one way or another, and Emily's question made reference to that.

"What had I best do with Branwell when he was naughty?" was father's question to Emily. I liked her answer. "Reason with him, and when he won't listen to reason, whip him!" Notice that she didn't say "if he won't listen to reason", but "when". She knew that Branwell never listened to reason.

But, although Branwell was often naughty, he and I were very close. You could say that, as we got older, we became soul mates. We created an imaginary country, called Angia, and we wrote stories together about it. Branny wrote mainly about the battles and I wrote about the love stories. We were so close at that time, that when Emily came to write *Wuthering Heights* years later, she was thinking about Branny and I when she wrote about Cathy and Heathcliff. Of course I was nothing like Catherine Earnshaw and Branny was nothing like Heathcliff. But I remember saying once that "I don't love Branwell, I *am* Branwell." Emily must have heard me, and stored this in her mind for later use.

In our sunnier days there was a good deal of laughter, and my best friend Ellen Nussey here was often part of such merriment. She has some memories of dear Branny.

ELLEN NUSSEY

I met Charlotte at Roe Head School. We both started there in January 1831. I met Branwell when he visited Charlotte at the school in May. He walked the 23 miles from Haworth, just to spend a few hours with her – and then 23 miles back again, all in the one day!

But I really got to know Branwell in October the next year, when I invited Charlotte to visit me at Rydings for two weeks. Branwell escorted her in a two-wheeled gig, the only conveyance to be had in Haworth.

Branwell probably had never been far from home before and was in wild ecstasy about everything. He walked about in unrestrained boyish enjoyment, taking views in every direction of the old turret-roofed house, the fine chestnut trees on the lawn (one tree especially interested him because it was 'iron-garthed', having been split by storms, but still flourishing in great majesty), and a large rookery, which gave the house a good background – all these he noted and commented upon with perfect enthusiasm. He told his sister he 'was leaving her in Paradise, and if she were not intensely happy she would never be!'

The following summer I paid a return visit to Haworth. The house was nowhere near as grand as my own, at Rydings. But it seemed comfortable enough – if only it was no so near the graveyard!

Branwell was now sixteen. He studied regularly with his father, and painted in oils, getting ready to become a distinguished artist. The family had assigned one room, on the right, at the back, as you mounted the staircase, with views across the moors above Stanbury and the Sladen Valley.

A few weeks after this first visit to Haworth, Branwell planned an excursion to Bolton Priory. We arranged to meet at the Devonshire Arms Hotel at Bolton Bridge. The September weather was beautiful. The Brontës arrived in the humble gig, driven by Branwell. He was in high glee, happy with himself, and full of eloquence. And the excitement was general and the tongues of his sisters were almost as unloosed as his own – even Emily's, which is saying something.

But in retrospect, my mistake was to have come surrounded by a whole party of brothers and sisters and friends, grown up men and women from another world to that inhabited by the desperately shy quartet from Haworth. There was a gulf between the sophistication of my family and friends and their own inexperience. Branwell was used to being the centre of attention, as he was better read and more eloquent than those with whom he mixed. But here he felt he was completely out of his depth.

His shock of red hair hung down in somewhat ragged locks. He believed that long, unkempt, hair gave him the appearance of genius. When they arrived, and met my brothers, he felt himself to be a country bumpkin alongside their more mature confidence. Branwell became unusually quiet. But my brothers were 27 and 19 respectively and were already 'men of the world' so Branwell had no reason to feel inferior, other than the fact that he was younger.

His family expected that Branwell would be the one to make his family forever known, but that was not to be. He was very well educated in the classics, under the tutorship of Mr Brontë. And he was talented in painting,

poetry and music. It was not clear in which of these areas he would make his mark.

Painting was the chosen field and he set up as a portrait painter in Bradford. Here he met many painters and sculptors, including the accomplished Joseph Leyland.

JOSEPH LEYLAND

I met Branwell when he had set himself up as a portrait painter in Bradford. I used to meet him at the George Hotel, with several other gentlemen. There was John Wilson Anderson, the landscape painter, and Skerrett the actor. Oh, yes I was forgetting old Jack – John Nicholson, the Airedale poet.

Let me tell you a little about myself. I'm a sculptor and have earned quite a reputation, not just in the North, but in London as well. My sister, Mary, has described me as self-opinionated, sarcastic and unreliable – scornful of religion and of anyone who disagreed with me. I will admit that I don't abide fools easily, but I think that unflattering description would be better applied to Branwell.

He had a strange mixture of arrogant pride and self-effacing humility. He was one of those talented people who realise that they are not of the absolute first class. When he was in good spirits he was thoroughly entertaining. He had us all laughing, and he was very erudite with his extensive knowledge of poetry. He would often read one of his own compositions. But when he was down, he was silent and morose, and drank rather more than was good for him.

Branwell was rather below middle height, but of a refined and gentleman-like appearance, and of graceful manners. His complexion was fair and his features handsome; his mouth and chin were well-shaped; his nose was prominent and of the Roman type; his eyes sparkled and danced with delight, and his forehead made up of a face of oval form which gave an irresistible charm to its possessor, and attracted the admiration of those who knew him. Some people have described him less flatteringly as "almost insignificantly small" and with "a mass of red hair which he wore brushed off his forehead – to help his height I fancy... small ferret eyes, deep sunk and still further hidden by the never removed spectacles."

I remember getting a letter from Branwell a year and a half before he died. I have it even now.

I am going to write a scrawl for the querulous egotism of which I must entreat your mercy, but when I look upon my past, present and future, and then into my own self, I find much, however unpleasant, that yearns for utterance.

I received an unopened letter which I addressed to Lydia at Thorp Green. She, surrounded by powerful persons who hate me like hell, has sunk into religious melancholy and believes that her weight of sorrow is God's punishment.

I had reason to hope that ere very long I should be the husband of a lady whom I loved best in the world, and with whom, in more than competence, I might live at leisure to try to make myself a name in the world of posterity, without being pestered by the small but countless botherments, which like mosquitoes sting us in the world of work-day toil. That hope, and herself, are gone – she to wither into patiently pining decline.

For four years a lady intensely loved me as I did her, and each sacrificed to that love all we had to sacrifice, and held out to each other HOPE for our guide to the future. She was all I could wish for in a woman, and vastly above me in rank, and she loved me even better than I did her. Now what is the result of these four years? UTTER WRECK. The vessel *Great Britain* is not so thoroughly stranded as I am.

I have received today a note from Lydia's maid, and I know from it that Lydia has been terrified by vows which she was forced to swear to, on her husband's deathbed, a complete severance from me in whom lays her whole heart's feelings. When that husband was scarce cold in his grave her relations, who controlled the whole property, overwhelmed her with their tongues, and I am quite conscious that she has succumbed in terror to what they have said.

Branwell didn't succeed with his painting, not because he lacked talent, but because he tried to rely on talent alone. Art requires the ability to strive and to learn from failure. All of us artists have our setbacks and we learn from them as our determination to succeed shines through. Branwell was too easily discouraged.

So he gave up his painting and, needing to earn some money, he turned to the railways that were starting up all over the country. It was there that he met Francis Grundy.

FRANCIS GRUNDY

Yes, I remember Branwell Brontë well. I met him when he first started at Luddenham Foot station. I was an engineer on the Manchester and Leeds Railway. I remember the day he began. It was All Fools Day, April 1st, 1841. When he announced that he was taking up his position as Station Master I wondered at first if he was pulling my leg. He looked such an unlikely looking fellow – more like a leprechaun than a station master, with his bright red hair and eyes that twinkled.

It wasn't a busy station, so there was often not much for Branwell to do. Frequently I caught him with his feet up on his desk, contemplating the world. This was often after we'd had a great night before at the George Hotel. If he wasn't doing that, he'd be drawing little sketches in the margins of his account

book, or writing poetry. Sometimes, as I approached his office I'd hear him playing songs like *Ye Banks and Braes* on his flute.

I warned him that he should use the time in getting his books in order, ready for whenever they might audit him, but he just fobbed me off with some cheeky remark. Well, things did catch up with him and he was dismissed. Some money was missing. I'm sure it was the porter who was taking it, but with his careless book-keeping Branwell didn't discover that anything was amiss until the discrepancy had exceeded 11 pounds.

I visited Branwell about a week before he died. I hadn't seen him for some time as I had been away. It was to be a surprise. I ordered dinner for two in a private room at the Black Bull and then sent up to the parsonage for Branwell. A short time later I was surprised to see, not Branwell, but his father. He warned me to be prepared for a dramatic change in Branwell's appearance. He spoke of Branwell with more affection than I had heretofore heard him express, but he also spoke, almost hopelessly. He said that when my message came, Branwell was in bed, and had been almost too weak for the last few days to leave it; nevertheless, he had insisted upon coming, and would be there immediately.

Presently the door opened cautiously, and a head appeared. It was a mass of red, unkempt, uncut hair, wildly floating round a great, gaunt forehead; the cheeks yellow and hollow, the mouth fallen, the thin white lips not trembling but shaking, the sunken eyes, once small, now glaring with the light of madness – all told the sad tale but too surely.

I greeted my guest in my gayest manner and forced a stiff glass of hot brandy upon him. Under its influence, and that of the bright, cheerful surroundings, he looked frightened – frightened of himself. He glanced at me a moment, and muttered something of leaving a warm bed to come out into the cold night.

Gradually, however, with another glass of brandy inside him, something like the Brontë of old returned, though he remained grave throughout the evening. He described himself as waiting anxiously for death – indeed, longing for it, and happy, in his sane moments, to think that it was so near, and declared that his death would be solely due to his disastrous relationship with Mrs Robinson.

As I left I noticed that Brontë had a knife that he hidden on his person. He said that he'd thought the summons had come from the devil, and he was determined to rush at him with the knife. Only the sound of my voice had brought him to himself.

Branwell believed that all his troubles came from his unrequited love for this good lady on my left. But I firmly believe that his devils came from within and that he mistook her great friendship for him as a portent of something more.

LADY SCOTT (LYDIA ROBINSON)

You speak the truth. I shouldn't feel that I was to blame for Branwell's demise, and yet I can't help feeling guilty. Perhaps I should have made a greater effort to make it clear to Branwell that though I loved him dearly, I loved my husband too – in a different way – and there was no way that I could contemplate leaving Edmund. Apart from anything else, what would we live on? Branwell was penniless.

Actually I knew Branwell's sister, Anne, before I knew Branwell. She had been the governess to our daughters since May 1840. A few years later Edmund and I decided that we needed a tutor for our young son. I asked Anne if she knew of anyone suitable and she recommended her brother. She said that he was very learned in the classics, as well of poetry and other literature. So in January 1843 Branwell became tutor at Thorp Green.

Although I was 15 years older than Branwell we became very dear friends. Edmund, always seemed to be preoccupied with his church affairs – he was a minister in the Church of England – and he seemed to have very little interest in things that interested me. I am a passionate woman, and painting, poetry and music are things that are really important to me. Edmund was a good husband, but he made it quite clear, on many occasions, that he thought such things a waste of time. I couldn't even talk to him about religion. He considered the beliefs of the Church of England less important than its practices, and the question of what incense should be used in the thuribles seemed to him to be more important than the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount.

Not that I could talk to Branwell about religion. He felt that being the son of a parson, he had had more than his fair share of religion. But on so many other subjects that were dear to my heart I could pour out my soul to Branwell.

So I became very fond of Branwell. Of course there was no way we were lovers. Despite his failings I loved my husband and I remained faithful to him. But we had to be discreet and arrange to be together in secret, because dear Edmund wouldn't understand. He would have been violently jealous if he found out and would have thought the worst.

But Branwell would have liked our relationship to go further. Would you believe he actually asked me to run away with him. I made up some sort of excuse about Edmund being unable to survive without me.

But I think Branwell was infatuated with me. He wrote to one of his friends "my mistress is DAMNABLY TOO FOND OF ME". I did give him a lock of my hair – there's nothing wrong in that, surely. But he wrote to his friends that he went to bed with that lock of my hair and wished he could have had the rest of me there. He really was a very naughty boy!

I exhorted him to be careful that Edmund never found out about us, but he was very careless. Eventually Edmund did find out and sent him away. I was sorry to see him go, but I must admit that it was starting to get out of hand.

The worst part of it was that Anne felt that she had to resign too. I really missed her – she was so good with the children.

For several months after his dismissal I regularly sent Branwell small amounts of money from Thorpe Green. This was partly because I felt sorry for him, but also partly because he could have made a fuss and embarrassed me with my friends.

Sometime later Edmund died. I know I hinted to Branwell that if this ever happened I would become his, but I didn't really mean it. It was just to keep him quiet. I didn't think my husband would die so soon and thought that when it did happen Branwell would have long forgotten me. He sent me letters imploring me to honour our agreement, as he said. It was never an agreement – just a vague suggestion that this might be our future. So I had to send him a message to say that Edmund had put it into his will that if I renewed my acquaintance with Branwell I would lose my inheritance. Surely, I thought, Branwell would understand that this was an insuperable barrier. He certainly had no money, nor any prospect of ever earning any.

I'm sorry to say that this sent him into a spiral of despair, and was the beginning of his physical and mental downfall. But what was I to do? I was fond of him, and would have been happy to continue as before. But Branwell wanted to possess me body and soul. I am a passionate woman, certainly, but I want the passion to be on my terms. Branwell was too much!

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

I never met this Branwell Brontë. All I know about him is that he sent me a letter dated January 19th 1837. I have it here, so I'll read it to you.

Sir – I most earnestly entreat you to read and pass your judgement upon what I have sent you (there was an enclosure with some lines of poetry), because from my birth to the nineteenth year of my life I have lived among secluded hills, where I could neither know what I was or what I could do.

I read for the same reason that I eat or drink; because it is a real craving of nature. I write on the same principle as I speak – out of the impulse and feelings of my mind; nor can I help it, for what comes out, comes out, and there is the end of it.

For as to self-conceit, that cannot receive food from flattery, since to this hour not half-a-dozen people in the world know that I have penned a line.

But a change has taken place now, sir; and I am arrived at an age wherein I must do something for myself; the powers I possess must be exercised to a definite end, and as I don't know them myself I must ask others what they are worth.

Yet there is not one here to tell me; and still, if they are worthless, time will henceforth be too precious to be wasted on them.

Do pardon me, sir, that I have ventured to come before one whose works I have most loved in our literature, and who most has been with me a divinity of the mind, laying before him one of my writings, and asking him a judgement of its contents. I must come

before someone from whose sentence there is no appeal; and such a one is he who had developed the theory of poetry as well as its practice, and both in such a way as to claim a place in the memory of a thousand years to come.

My aim, sir, is to push out into the open world, and for this I trust not poetry alone; that might launch the vessel, but could not bear her on. Sensible and scientific prose, bold and vigorous efforts in my walk of life, would give a further title to the notice of the world; and then again poetry ought to brighten and crown that name with glory. But nothing of all this can ever be begun without means, and as I don't possess these I must in every shape strive to gain them. Surely, in this day, when there is not a *writing* poet worth a sixpence, the field must be open, if a better man can step forward.

Now, to send you whole of this would be a mock upon your patience; what you see does not pretend to be more than the description of an imaginative child. But read it, sir; and as you would hold a light to one in utter darkness – as you value your own kindheartedness – return me an answer if but one word, telling me whether I should write on, or write no more. Forgive undue warmth, because my feelings in this matter cannot be cool; and believe me, sir, with deep respect,

Your really humble servant,
P.B. Brontë

Let me read you some lines from the insert to the letter.

Oh, how I could wish to fly
Far away through yonder sky,
O'er those trees upon the breeze
To a paradise on high.

Why am I so bound below
That I must not, cannot go
Lingering here for year on year
So long before we die.

Now how glorious seems to be
Heavens great arch spread wide o'er me
But every star is hung so far
Away from where I lie.

I love to see that Moon arise
It suits so with these silent skies
I love it well but cannot tell
How it should make me cry.

A Sunday School child of seven could have done better. When I read it I naturally didn't think such a letter from such a conceited puppy warranted a

reply and I screwed it up and threw it away. But I then fished it out and kept it so that I could chuckle over it from time to time.

WILLIAM DEARDEN

I met Branwell Brontë when I was teaching the classics at Keighley Grammar School. Although I was fifteen years older than him I found him an entertaining and erudite young man. He was well taught in the classics and we would often recite to each other pieces from the classical poets. I love the Latin and Greek languages – as does my wife. Would you believe that when we were courting we wrote our love letters to each other in these languages.

Branwell showed me some of the poetry that he wrote. I remember him telling me that the original of the Caroline in Branwell's Angrian poetry was none other than my cousin. I had told Branwell about my dear Caroline, who died ten years before, and he was so taken with my description of her that he memorialised her in his poetry. Like Branwell, I wrote poetry and was fortunate to be able to see it in print. Branwell was encouraged by this, and he said if I could get published, why not him.

Once I remember that some of us decided to hold a writing competition. The place for the competition was the Cross Roads Inn, halfway between Haworth and Keighley. The idea was that we would each bring something to read aloud to the group and Joseph Leyland was to be the judge. The poems had to be antediluvian – that is, pertaining to the time before Noah's flood.

Branwell said that he'd written a poem called *Azrael, or Destruction's Eve*. But when the time came for him to read it Branwell reached into his hat, where he had kept his manuscript and discovered to his chagrin that he'd brought the wrong manuscript. He said he'd ride straight home to fetch the right one, but we said that instead he should read what he had brought. It turned out that it was the opening pages of a novel.

1801.—I have just returned from a visit to my landlord—the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with. This is certainly a beautiful country! In all England, I do not believe that I could have fixed on a situation so completely removed from the stir of society. A perfect misanthropist's heaven: and Mr. Heathcliff and I are such a suitable pair to divide the desolation between us. A capital fellow! He little imagined how my heart warmed towards him when I beheld his black eyes withdraw so suspiciously under their brows, as I rode up, and when his fingers sheltered themselves, with a jealous resolution, still further in his waistcoat, as I announced my name.

I know that these lines are the opening lines of the Ellis Bell's novel, *Wuthering Heights* and that Charlotte insists that her sister, Emily, wrote them. Yet my memory is clear. I heard those lines, read by Branwell as his own, at the Crossroads Inn. I suppose it's possible he could have picked up Emily's

manuscript by mistake. I saw the pages and it certainly looked like Branwell's hand. But then some people have said that their handwriting was very similar.

But how could Branwell have come by Emily's manuscript? Emily was a very private person and surely wouldn't leave her writing around where Branwell could pick it up by mistake. Though, I must confess she did once leave her poems around where Charlotte could come across them. Emily was very cross, but Charlotte was eventually able to persuade her to allow her poems to be included in their first publication.

Still, would Branwell have been so dishonest as to pass off Emily's writing as his own? Well I suppose he did enjoy looking at our faces when he read that devilish story.

JOHN BROWN

I dare say I've known Branwell since he was born. I was sexton and stonemason at Haworth when the Brontë family arrived in Haworth and I saw Branwell grow up. We were good friends all his life, even though I was about 14 years older than he was.

I lived with my family – wife and six daughters – next to the Sunday School, just opposite the church. So Patrick and I were neighbours. Martha, one of my daughters, worked for the Brontë family for over 30 years.

My job at the church was to help maintain the church property, mow the lawns, arrange for repairs and to make sure everything that was needed for the services was available. So I had to order in the candles, and the communion wine and to make sure that Patrick's vestments were cleaned regularly.

I also did most of the manual work for the many burials we had at Haworth. I was a stone mason by trade, and a skilled one at that, if I may say so myself. In my younger days I even dug the graves.

People have said I led Branwell astray and encouraged his excessive drinking. Well, it is true that I loved my beer and whisky, but who wouldn't need something to refresh his spirits after a morning spent in digging graves! But Branwell didn't seem to hold his liquor well, like a man.

You might have thought that Branwell and I were of a different class, but you'd be wrong. Just because part of my work was digging graves and chipping stone I'm not of the labouring class. I'm very well read and can hold my own in talking to Branwell about poetry.

I became Grand master of the Haworth Lodge – the Lodge of Three Graces. Branwell joined in February 1836 and he took over as secretary in June the next year. We also appointed him as 'organist'. Well, no, we didn't have an organ. It was a piano that someone had donated. But Branwell could play the organ. He sometimes played in the church. He also played the flute. He would often entertain us in the Black Bull, playing Scottish folksongs and the like.

Branwell enjoyed shocking people. I've still got a letter he wrote to me in 1840. I found it so shocking, and so amusing too, that I passed it around the brothers at the Lodge, and I've kept it as a memento.

Don't think I have forgotten you, though I have delayed so long in writing to you. It was my purpose to send you a yarn as soon as I could find materials to spin one with, and it is only just now that I have had time to turn myself round and know where I am. If you saw me now, you would not know me, and you would laugh to hear the character the people give me. Oh, the falsehood and hypocrisy of this world! I am fixed in a little retired town by the sea-shore, among wild woody hills that rise round me – huge, rocky, and capped with clouds.

My employer is a retired county magistrate, a large landowner, and of a right hearty and generous disposition. His wife is a quiet, silent, and amiable woman, and his sons are two fine, spirited lads. My landlord is a respectable surgeon, and six days out of seven is as drunk as a lord! His wife is a bustling, chattering, kind-hearted soul; and his daughter! – oh! death and damnation! Well, what am I? That is, what do they think I am? A most calm, sedate, sober, abstemious, patient, mild-hearted, virtuous, gentlemanly philosopher, the picture of good works, and the treasure-house of righteous thoughts. Cards are shuffled under the table-cloth, glasses are thrust into the cupboard, if anybody enters the room. I take neither spirits, wine, nor malt liquors. I dress in black, and smile like a saint or martyr. Everybody says 'What a good young gentleman is Mr Postlethwaite's tutor!' This is a fact, as I am a living soul, and right comfortably do I laugh at them. I mean to continue in their good opinion.

I took a half year's farewell of old friend whisky at Kendal on the night after I left. There was a party of gentlemen at the Royal Hotel, and I joined them. We ordered in supper and whisky-toddy as 'hot as hell!' They thought I was a physician, and put me in the chair. I gave sundry toasts, that were washed down at the same time, till the room spun round and the candles danced in our eyes. One of the guests was a respectable old gentleman with powdered head, rosy cheeks, fat paunch, and ringed fingers. He gave 'The Ladies' after which he brayed off with a speech; and in two minutes, in the middle of a grand sentence, he stopped, wiped his head, looked wildly round, stammered, coughed, stopped again and called for his slippers. The waiter helped him to bed.

Next a tall Irish squire and a native of the land of Israel began to quarrel about their countries; and, in the warmth of argument, discharged their glasses, each at his neighbour's throat instead of his own. I recommended bleeding, purging, and blistering; but they administered each other a real 'Jem Warder', so I flung my tumbler on the floor too, and swore I'd join 'Old Ireland!' A regular rumpus ensued, but we were tamed at last.

I found myself in bed next morning, with a bottle of porter, a glass, and a corkscrew beside me. Since then I have not tasted anything stronger than milk and water, nor, I hope, shall, till I return at mid-summer; when we will see about it. I am getting as fat as Prince William at Springhead, and as godly as his friend, Parson Winterbotham. My hand shakes no longer. I sit drinking tea and talking scandal with old

ladies. As to the young ones! I have one sitting by me just now – fair-faced, blue-eyed, dark-haired, sweet eighteen – she little thinks the devil is so near her!

I was delighted to see thy note, old squire, but I do not understand one sentence – you will perhaps know what I mean ... How are all about you? I long to hear and see them again. How is the 'Devil's Thumb', whom men call and the 'Devil in Mourning', whom they call How are and the Doctor; and him whose eyes Satan looks out of ... 'Longshanks' and the rest of them? Are they married, buried, devilled, and damned? When I come I'll give them a good squeeze of the hand; till then I am too godly for them to think of.

That bow-legged devil used to ask me impertinent questions which I answered him in kind. Beelzebub will make of him a walking stick! Keep to thy teetotalism, old squire, till I return; it will mend thy old body

Does 'Little Nosey' think I have forgotten him? No, by Jupiter! nor his clock either. I'll send him a remembrance some of these days! I must talk to someone prettier than thee; so good-night, old boy, and

Believe me thine,

The Philosopher

PS Write directly. Of course you won't show this letter; and for heaven's sake, blot out all the lines scored with red ink.

Well that letter was shown to all of Haworth, or at least to that portion that met in the Black Bull, under the benevolent eye of the landlord, 'Old Nosey'. But I did cross out those names that Branwell had underlined in red ink. Not that this stopped people knowing who he meant!

I suppose I was the last person to see him alive. It was Sunday morning, 24th September last, if I remember rightly. He had been poorly the day before – a wreck of what once had been a talented soul. I visited the parsonage before the service and went up to Branwell's room. The death agony began as soon as I entered the room.

"Oh, John, I'm dying!" he cried out. I called out to the family and they came upstairs and stood around his bedside. "In my past life," gasped Branwell, "I have done nothing great or good." I hurried off to the church, awaiting the signal to ring the passing bell. It took some time. I was later told that Branwell's struggles and convulsions were great and continued for some time. At the last gasp he tried to stand up, and fell dead in his father's arms.

HUMOUR IN THE BRONTË NOVELS

A talk given by Christopher Cooper at the meeting on 7th October 2017.

When we think of the Brontë novels, probably the last thing we think of is humour. Dickens, yes – Lewis Carroll, of course, but the Brontës are sometimes thought of as being gloomy, and often thought of as being intense. It's true that one has to search for humour in the Brontë canon, but it *is* there. All three Brontës can be quite funny when they put their minds to it.

I've divided my talk into two sections. I'll begin by talking about the theory of humour in general and then, after a break, I'll remind you of some of the few comic scenes in the Brontë novels.

Let's begin with the physiology of humour. The reaction to something funny can be at many different levels. We can enjoy humour entirely within ourselves, with no obvious external reaction. Then, in increasing order, comes the smile, the grin and the laugh. A giggle is usually an extended laugh.

Beyond that, if we think that something is extraordinarily funny we may even roll around on the floor – and it has been known for people to laugh so much they lose control of their bladder. But what is the physiological link between the mental process and the muscles. Is it entirely cultural, or is there a neurological connection?

What makes something funny is very difficult to analyse. Humour changes from culture to culture and from generation to generation. The unfunny riddles that we find in our Christmas crackers would have made our Victorian counterparts roar with laughter.

In *Alice in Wonderland* the Mock Turtle reminisced about his youth. "When we were young we went to school in the sea. The master was an old Turtle – we used to call him Tortoise."

"Why did you call him Tortoise, if he wasn't one?" Alice asked.

"We called him Tortoise because he taught us," said the Mock Turtle angrily: "really you are very dull!"

This is an example of the pun. They're still around but they're not as mainstream in the Victorian era.

Many people, including Freud, have prepared lists of humour types, and all the lists are different. Here's my list.

(1) Verbal Humour.

The simplest form of verbal humour is the pun. This arises when a word, or a phrase, means two different things and the meanings are brought together. Sometimes the spelling, and even the pronunciation may vary with the two meanings. The most common place where we find puns these days is in newspaper headlines.

C.S. Lewis describes the reaction to a pun as a sort of explosion as the two meanings come together in our brains. It's interesting that when a word has two disparate meanings we store them separately in our brains.

I'll give you an example. I've known Malvina Yock for many years. I've also known for many years that the Malvinas is the Argentinean name for the Falkland Islands. But I never associated the two. They were stored in two separate parts of my brain. Earlier this year I actually visited the Falklands and came across the name 'Malvinas' and still didn't associate it with our Malvina. It was only after I got back that suddenly the two Malvinas came together in my brain. If I had tried I could probably have worked it up into a pun.

With Lewis Carroll's pun we are thinking of 'tortoise' as a land animal that crawls around in a shell. Then suddenly this word collides with the phrase 'taught us' and we laugh.

A recent Column 8 item, in the Sydney Morning Herald, listed some more modern puns. I thought this one was rather good.

A man needs a mistress – just to break the monogamy.

Here are some visual examples of the simple pun.



RINK TO ME ONLY

This is from Punch of 1886. That was the year when roller skating became fashionable in London. There were at least half a dozen cartoons that year that feature this new craze. The reference is to the well-known folk song *Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes*. Here are some more modern visual puns.



BRONTESAURUS



Reader I marinated him

There are many variations of the pun. A conundrum involves a question and an answer. The answer involves using a word or phrase in two different senses. We get these in Christmas crackers every year. Here are some conundrums from an 1883 book.

What do lawyers do when they die?
They lie still.

What shape is a kiss?
A lip tickle.

Some conundrums are double barrelled.

Why are birds melancholy in the morning?
Because their bills are all over dew.

What sort of tune do we enjoy most?
For-tune, because it is made up of bank notes.

Also from Column 8 was the following.
Why can't the bicycle stand on its own?
Because it is two tired.

Then you have the knock-knock jokes. They have the form:
Knock knock.
Who's there?
X, (where X is a name)
X who?
XY.

Here X changes its meaning as part of the phrase XY.

Knock knock.
Who's there?
Amos.
Amos who?
A mosquito.

Knock knock.
Who's there?
Theodore.
Theodore who?
Theodore wasn't open so I had to knock.

(2) Humour of exaggeration.

An account of an everyday incident being treated with undue reverence seems funny. Pope's poem, *The Rape of the Lock* tells of a lady having her hair attended to by her maid but it's told with exaggerated seriousness, as if it is some great religious ritual.

And now unveil'd, the toilet stands display'd,
Each silver vase in mystic order laid.
First robed in white, the nymph intent adores,
With head uncover'd, the cosmetic powers.
A heavenly image in the glass appears,
To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears ;
The inferior priestess, at her altar's side,
Trembling, begins the sacred rites of pride.
Unnumber'd treasures ope at once, and here
The various offerings of the world appear;
From each she nicely culls with curious toil,
And decks the goddess with the glittering spoil.
This casket India's glowing gems unlocks,
And all Arabia breathes from yonder box.
The tortoise here and elephant unite,
Transform 'd to combs, the speckled and the white.
Here files of pins extend their shining rows,
Puffs, powders, patches, Bibles, billet-doux.
Now awful Beauty puts on all its arms;
The fair each moment rises in her charms,
Repairs her smiles, awakens every grace,
And calls forth all the wonders of her face;
Sees by degrees a purer blush arise,
And keener lightnings quicken in her eyes.
The busy sylphs surround their darling care:
These set the head, and those divide the hair;
Some fold the sleeve, whilst others plait the gown;
And Betty's praised for labour not her own.

The Dagwood sandwich is another example of humour of exaggeration and, more recently, there is a lot of humour of exaggeration in *The Simpsons*.

Cartoonists make great use of humour of exaggeration when they create a caricature of somebody famous. Prince Charles has prominent ears, so he's drawn with a pair of enormous ears that stick out of his head at right angles.

In the New Testament Jesus is shown as having a dry and cheeky sense of humour. "Take no thought for tomorrow," he said in the Sermon on the Mount.

“God knows tomorrow has enough problems of its own.” Jesus was a master at the humour of exaggeration.

“It is harder for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God than it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle”. This is sometimes explained by reference to a gate in Jerusalem that was called The Eye of a Needle. But those who think this is the explanation are missing the point (excuse the pun). I’m sure Jesus meant a *real* needle and he was creating in his hearer’s mind the ridiculous image of a *real* camel trying to fit through the hole in an *actual* needle. Humour of exaggeration!

“If your eye offends you, cut it out” was never intended to be taken literally. He said “If you say to a mountain, in faith, ‘throw yourself into the sea’ and it shall be done, indicating the power of prayer – but again it’s a deliberate exaggeration.



Emily dear, this isn't healthy. Why don't you write it out of your system

(3) Humour of inappropriateness.

We laugh when we see an animal performing some act that is normally only done by humans. This is humour of the inappropriate. Mr Bean was running late for his dental appointment so he dressed himself while driving to his dentist. When he needed to clean his teeth he stuck his head out of the window and used the water from the windscreen washer to rinse his mouth. Again humour of the inappropriate.



(4) Humour of confusion.

When someone believes that something is other than what it really is, and acts upon it, we laugh at them – humour of confusion. Don Quixote thinks the windmills are an army of giants and he goes to fight them. Shakespeare often used humour of confusion in his plays with characters in disguise. Antonio meets a pretty girl and doesn't realise that she is his wife in disguise.

Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales* employs the humour of confusion. For example in the Miller's tale John, a carpenter, has a pretty young wife, Alisoun. Two students, Nicholas and Absolon are boarding with John and his wife and they both fall in love with her. Nicholas tells John that he has had a vision from God and that a flood, like Noah's, is about to overtake them. The only way they can save themselves is to tie three tubs to the rafters of the barn, and each of

them should climb into a separate tub. When the flood comes they would cut the ropes and float away.

They climb into their respective tubs but, when they hear John snoring, Nicholas and Alisoun climb down and spend the night together in the marital bed. Just before Dawn, Absolon comes home and calls out to Alisoun and asks for a kiss. At first she resists but then she tells him that she will put her face out of the window and kiss her on the cheek. It is still very dark, and when he moves up to the window for his kiss he doesn't realise that she has put her naked backside out of the window. Absolon kisses it, believing it to be her cheek – well I suppose it was in a way. Both Nicholas and Alisoun laugh at him. But Absolon says that if she allows him to kiss her on the lips he will give her a gold ring. She agrees and he goes off to fetch the ring. But, instead, he fetches a hot poker. He returns and this time it is Nicholas's backside that is protruding from the window. But before he can use the poker Nicholas farts in his face. Absolon thrusts the poker and Nicholas screams. Hearing all the noise John wakes up, believing that the flood has come and so he cuts the ropes and comes crashing down. All the townspeople arrive and John tells his incredible story. Nicholas and Alisoun pretend not to know anything about it and so the townspeople laugh at John, thinking that he has gone mad!



Tommy (on his way home from church):

What did you take out of the plate, Mama. I only got sixpence!

(5) Trigger humour

Several of Chaucer's tales could be called toilet humour. This is the sort of humour that young boys find so hilarious. You just have to mention a body part or a bodily function and they are already laughing. It requires little else. These words acts as a trigger.

These days the name Donald Trump is a trigger for humour – mention his name and you don't have to add much to make people laugh.

Those of you who have seen Miriam Margolyes in her Dickens Women show will have experienced this trigger humour. As she talks about each of his young heroines she reminds the audience of their age – they are just ... seventeen.

Sometimes the trigger is some stereotype. An Englishman, a Scotsman, an Irishman go into a pub. Already we are smiling. It doesn't take much more to make a joke. The comic strip Zits in the Herald gets its humour from the sterotype of the teenage boy as being hopelessly lazy, untidy and smelly. This also employs the humour of exaggeration as the mess in his room is shown as a small mountain.

(6) Sarcasm.

Here the humour is used as a weapon to get at somebody. But gentle sarcasm is called 'teasing' and this is often used with someone you love. I'm sure you can think of instances of this type of humour in *Jane Eyre*.

There are probably many other types of humour. I thought of listing satire but I then realised that satire relates more to the *purpose* of that humour rather than the *method*. Satire utilises all of the methods that I've mentioned.

Shakespeare was one of the greatest comic writers of all time, employing every single one of the six types. *Gulliver's Travels* is satire, but it mainly uses the humour of exaggeration. The humour that Dickens employs is mostly the humour of exaggeration. Lewis Carrol uses a lot of verbal humour, as well as the humour of inappropriateness.

In this part of the talk we're going to laugh over the few funny scenes in the Brontë novels. The funniest Brontë novel is *Shirley*. That's not to say that it's a comic novel. There are just two isolated scenes that contain humour – but these are as funny as anything you might find in Dickens.

The scene is the parlour of Mrs Gale's house where her boarder, Mr Donne, has been entertaining his brethren, Malone and Sweeting, to dinner. All

three are curates from neighbouring parishes have developed the habit of visiting each other. When they get together, which they do practically every night at one or other of their lodgings, their behaviour is far from what one would expect of young clerical gentlemen. Their respective landladies are longsuffering.

But before we even meet them Charlotte give us an amusing description of curates, as if they were raindrops that have fallen over the North of England.

Of late years an abundant shower of curates has fallen upon the North of England. But thirty years ago that affluent rain was as yet a light drizzle. Or, to use another conceit, curates were a rare flower. But though scarce the precious plant might still be found in certain places. In fact a certain district in the West Riding of Yorkshire could boast three such specimens blossoming within a radius of twenty miles. Step into this house on the skirts of Whinbury, walk forward into the little parlour, and there they are at dinner.

Donne, Malone and Sweeting are at table, waited on by a flustered Mrs Gale. Their behaviour is quite incongruous for men of the cloth.

Sweeting calls out to Mrs Gale, "Take these scraps away." Donne complains, "I say, this beer is flat!" Malone thumps on the table demanding, "more bread!"

Mrs Gale offers him the loaf, but he cries out, "Cut it for me, woman!" This is the humour of the unexpected. She cuts it.

Sweeting calls out, "get me more of that tough beef. Malone thumps the table again, "another glass of that damnable wine!" Donne is equally demanding, "have you no more of those spice cakes. Don't I pay you well enough for my board in this house and yet you have the impertinence to run out of spice cakes when I entertain my guests!"

Clearly Charlotte had a low opinion of curates. Her father had entertained many of them over the years and, although this account is a clear exaggeration, she had obviously witnessed enough coarse behaviour from this direction to make this satirical account.

Mrs Gale attempts to get more wine and beef and apologise for there being no more spice cakes, all at the same time and is on the point of bursting into tears. But the curates ignore her and, arguing over some point, raise their voices at each other, though their actual words cannot be distinguished. Mrs Gale goes to the door and finds Mr Helstone just outside. He is the rector of Briarfield, and so is their ecclesiastical superior.

Mrs Gale invites him in. "Oh! Mr Helstone, is it you sir? I could hardly see you for the darkness. Will you walk in sir?"

"Who have you there?" he asks.

“The curates, sir! Mr Malone and Mr Sweeting are dining with Mr Donne.” The din from the parlour continues.

“Do you often have this sort of disturbance?”

“They’re only young, you know sir, and high-spirited.”

“Young! They want caning. Bad boys they are – bad boys.”

Helstone enters the parlour and stands before the curates. Once they notice him they fall silent. Helstone folds his arms on his chest and surveys the three.

“What! Has the miracle of Pentecost come upon us again? Where are the tongues of fire I heard a moment ago? I swear I heard seventeen languages in full flight a moment ago.”

Here we have the humour of exaggeration.

Donne apologises, “I beg your pardon, Mr Helstone. Take a seat, sir. Have a glass of wine?”

“Perhaps I mistook Acts for Genesis. What I heard was surely not the gift of tongues but a confusion of tongues. Are you, by any chance, three Babylonian masons at work on a building a tower?”

Sweeting answers him, “I assure you, sir, that we were only having a little chat together over a glass of wine after a friendly dinner – settling the Dissenters.”

“Settling the Dissenters were you? Was Malone settling the Dissenters? It sounded to me much more like you were quarrelling together. The three of you were making as much noise as Moses Barraclough in the Methodist Chapel when they are in the thick of a revival. I know whose fault it is – it is yours Malone.”

“Mine, sir?”

“Yours, sir! Donne and Sweeting were quiet before you came. Your Dublin ways won’t do here you know. I’ll have you know that I met Supplehough plodding through the mud this wet night, going to baptise some adult converts at the Baptist chapel. And I heard Barraclough bellowing in the Methodist chapel like a possessed bull. Yet here I find you three gentlemen tarrying over your half-pint of muddy port wine and scolding each other like angry old women. No wonder Supplehough dipped sixteen adult converts in a day, last fortnight and Barraclough preaches to bulging chapels. And little wonder that you, when left to conduct the holy offices by yourselves, so often perform to bare walls and empty pews and read your bit of dry discourse to the organist alone. But enough of this, I came to see Malone.”

“What is it? Surely there’s no funeral to take at this time of day.”

“Have you any arms about you?”

“Arms, sir? Yes, and legs too.” He waves them about.

Here we have the classic pun.

“Fool, I mean weapons!”

Much later in the book we meet the eponymous Shirley. She is a pretty, strong-minded young lady, of independent means. Her parents have died leaving her a fortune, so she’s in no hurry to rush into matrimony.

But her uncle has other ideas. Sir Phillip Nunnely has proposed to Shirley and she has turned him down. Uncle Sympson believes that she has made a grave mistake, for it would be good for the family if she married him.

Shirley and her uncle are sitting in the drawing-room, each in an armchair, placed opposite, a few yards between them. Uncle Sympson is clearly disturbed but Shirley is cool. She knows what is coming, and she plans to enjoy the encounter.

Mr Sympson begins the interview. “I have been to De Walden Hall.” He pauses. Shirley’s eyes are lowered.

“I have learned I have learned a circumstance which surprises me.” Shirley rests her cheek on her forefinger, waiting to be told what circumstance.

“It seems that Nunnely Priory is shut up; that the family are gone back. It seems that the baronet – that Sir Philip himself has accompanied his mother and sisters.”

“Indeed?”

“I mean – I mean – I mean to have a thorough explanation. I will not be put off. I – I – shall insist on being heard; and on – on having my own way. My questions must be answered. I will have clear, satisfactory replies. I am not to be trifled with.” There is silence. It is a strange and an extraordinary thing – a very singular – a most odd thing! I thought all was right: and there – the family are gone!”

“I suppose, sir, they had a right to go.”

“Sir Philip is gone!”

Shirley raises her eyebrows. “Bon voyage!”

Here is the humour of sarcasm. The hotter Mr Sympson gets under the collar the cooler is Shirley.

“This will not do: this must be altered, ma’am.” He draws his chair forward; he pushes it back; he looks perfectly incensed, and perfectly helpless.

“Come, come, now, uncle do not begin to fret and fume, or we shall make no sense of the business. Ask me what you want to know: I am as willing to come to an explanation as you: I promise you truthful replies.”

“I want – I demand to know, Miss Keeldar, whether Sir Philip has made you an offer?”

“He has.”

“He made you an offer that night we dined at the Priory?”

“It is enough to say that he made it. Go on.”

“You received a letter from him. On what subject – of what nature were the contents?”

“No matter.”

Here Shirley employs the pun. “Shirley could mean that the contents were on no particular subject, but she makes it deliberately come across as a rebuff – it doesn’t matter.”

“Ma’am, is that the way in which you speak to me?” Shirley taps her foot on the carpet.

“There you sit, silent and sullen – you who promised truthful replies!”

“Sir, I have answered you thus far: proceed.”

“I should like to see that letter.”

“You cannot see it.”

“I must and shall, ma’am. I am your guardian.”

“Having ceased to be a ward, I have no guardian.”

“Ungrateful being! Reared by me as my own daughter –

“Once more, uncle, have the kindness to keep to the point. Let us both remain cool. For my part, I do not wish to get into a passion; but, you know, once drive me beyond certain bounds, I care little what I say: I am not then soon checked. Listen! You have asked me whether Sir Philip made me an offer: that question is answered. What do you wish to know next?”

Shirley maintains the fiction of being cooperative in this conversation, but her uncle finds that she will only answer questions if they are made directly. It is like pulling teeth, a thing of great effort.

“I desire to know whether you accepted or refused him? and know it I will.”

“Certainly: you ought to know it. I refused him.”

“Refused him! You – you, Shirley Keeldar, refused Sir Philip Nunnely?”

“I did.” Mr Sympson bounces from his chair, and trots through the room.

Here we have some slapstick humour. The thought of grave, old, Mr Sympson bouncing or trotting is hilarious.

“There it is! There it is! There it is!”

“Uncle, you tire me: I want to go away.”

“Go you shall not! I will be answered. What are your intentions, Miss Keeldar?”

“In what respect?”

She will answer him, but only if he phrases the questions explicitly.

“In respect of matrimony.”

“To be quiet – and to do just as I please.”

“Just as you please ! The words are to the last degree indecorous.”

“Mr Sympson, I advise you not to become insulting: you know I will not bear that.”

“It will end in infamy, sooner or later: I have foreseen it all along.”

“Do you assert, sir, that something in which I am concerned will end in infamy?”

“That it will – that it will. You said just now you would act as you please. You acknowledge no rules – no limitations.”

“Silly stuff! and vulgar as silly?”

“Regardless of decorum, you are prepared to fly in the face of propriety.”

“You tire me, uncle.”

“What, madam – what could be your reasons for refusing Sir Philip?”

“At last, there is another sensible question: I shall be glad to reply to it. Sir Philip is too young for me: I regard him as a boy: all his relations – his mother especially – would be annoyed if he married me: I am not his equal in the world's estimation.”

“Is that all?”

“Our dispositions are not compatible.”

“Why, a more amiable gentleman never breathed.”

“He is very amiable – very excellent – truly estimable, but not my master. I will accept no hand which cannot hold me in check.”

“I thought you liked to do as you please: you are vastly inconsistent.”

“When I promise to obey, it shall be under the conviction that I can keep that promise: I could not obey a youth like Sir Philip. Besides, he would never command me: he would expect me always to rule – to guide, and I have no taste whatever for the office.”

“You no taste for swaggering, and subduing, and ordering, and ruling?”

“Not my husband: only my uncle. And I know full well, any man who wishes to live in decent comfort with me as a husband must be able to control me.”

“I wish you had a real tyrant.”

“A tyrant would not hold me for a day – not for an hour. I would rebel – break from him – defy him.”

“Sir Philip — he is a baronet; a man of rank, property, connexions, far above yours. And he is a poet: he writes verses.”

“Neither his title, his wealth nor his poetry invest him with the power I describe.”

“You rave about poetry! you used to catch fire like tinder on the subject when you were a girl.”

“Oh ! uncle, there is nothing really valuable in this world, there is nothing glorious in the world to come, that is not poetry?”

“Marry a poet, then, in God’s name!”

“Show him me, and I will.”

“Sir Philip.”

“Not at all. You are almost as good a poet as he.”

“Madam, you are wandering from the point.”

“Indeed, uncle, I wanted to do so; and I shall be glad to lead you away with me. Do not let us get out of temper with each other: it is not worth while.”

This is the humour of seeing someone, especially a pompous old man, losing his temper. And nothing raises the temperature of an antagonist more than for his opponent to remain perfectly calm and unflurried.

“Out of temper, Miss Keeldar! I should be glad to know who is out of temper?”

“I am not, yet.”

“If you mean to insinuate that I am, I consider that you are guilty of impertinence.”

“You will be soon, if you go on at that rate.”

“You described just now, with far too much freedom for your years and sex, the sort of individual you would prefer as a husband. Pray, did you paint from the life?”

“I have been in love several times.”

“This is cynical.”

“Once I loved Socrates.”

Here we have the humour of the unexpected – of bending the meaning of a word such as ‘love’ .

“Pooh! No trifling, ma'am.”

“To pass over a few centuries, Washington was a plain man, but I liked him: but, to speak of the actual present – “

“Ah! the actual present.”

“To quit crude schoolgirl fancies, and come to realities.”

“Realities! Make haste about it, if you please; confess you shall.”

“Confess, I must: my heart is full of the secret; it must be spoken.”

“Madam – I will know the name – does the person reside in Briarfield?”

“Uncle – I am going to tell you – his name is trembling on my tongue.”

“You shall tell me – “

“Listen! It is ... Arthur Wellesley, Lord Wellington.”

This is the humour of building up to a crescendo, and having it collapse in a totally unexpected direction.

Mr Sympson rises furiously: he bounces out of the room, but immediately bounces back again, shuts the door, and resumes his seat.

More bouncing. For his age he seems to be a most athletic man.

“Do you know the whole neighbourhood teems with rumours respecting you and a bankrupt tenant of yours – the foreigner Moore?”

“Does it?”

“Is it that person who has power to influence you?”

“Beyond any whose cause you have advocated.”

“Is it he you will marry?”

“He is handsome, and manly, and commanding.”

“You declare it to my face! The Flemish knave! The low trader!”

“Mr Sympson... I am sick at heart with all this weak trash: I will bear no more. Your thoughts are not my thoughts, your aims are not my aims, your gods are not my gods. As to your small maxims, your narrow rules, your little prejudices, bundle them off: Mr Sympson – go, offer them as a sacrifice to the deity you worship; I'll none of them: I wash my hands of the lot. I walk by another creed than you.”

“Another creed! I believe she is an infidel.”

“An infidel to your religion; an atheist to your god.”

“An – atheist! ! !”

“Your god, sir, is the World. Sir, your god, behold how hideously he governs! See him at work, making marriages. He binds the young to the old, the strong to the imbecile. Your god rules at the marriages of kings. Your god is a masked Death.”

“This language is terrible! My daughters and you must associate no longer, Miss Keeldar: there is danger in such companionship.”

“Now, sir, do you begin to be aware that it is useless for you to scheme for me? My heart, my conscience shall dispose of my hand – they only. Know this at last.”

“Never heard such language! Never was so addressed in my life – never was so used.”

“You are quite confused, sir. You had better withdraw, or I will.”

Mr Sympson rises hastily. He makes his way to the door; he comes back for his handkerchief; he drops his snuff-box; leaving the contents scattered on the carpet, he stumbles out. Tartar lays outside across the mat – Mr Sympson almost falls over him: in the climax of his exasperation he hurls an oath at the dog.

And so we end this farce with a good dose of the slapstick.

Surely there's no humour in *Wuthering Heights*. There's not a lot, but there is some, and Emily shows that even she can be funny if she puts her mind to it. The Reverend Branderham dream is amusing, with its humour of exaggeration. Joseph is undoubtedly a comic character. But the funniest part of the book is in the opening chapter where we meet Lockwood – a feckless young man, who is all too ready to jump to conclusions. Here we have the humour of confusion.

“A beautiful animal!” I commenced again. “Do you intend parting with the little ones, madam?”

“They are not mine,” said the amiable hostess, more repellingly than Heathcliff himself could have replied.”

‘Ah, your favourites are among these?’ I continued, turning to an obscure cushion full of something like cats.”

“A strange choice of favourites!” she observed scornfully.

Unluckily, it was a heap of dead rabbits. I hemmed once more, and drew closer to the hearth, repeating my comment on the wildness of the evening.

“You should not have come out,’ she said, rising and reaching from the chimney-piece two of the painted canisters.” The canisters were almost out of her reach; I made a motion to aid her; she turned upon me as a miser might turn if any one attempted to assist him in counting his gold.

“I don't want your help,” she snapped; “I can get them for myself.”

“I beg your pardon!” I hastened to reply.

“Were you asked to tea?” she demanded, tying an apron over her neat black frock, and standing with a spoonful of the leaf poised over the pot.

“I shall be glad to have a cup,” I answered.

“Were you asked?” she repeated.

“No,” I said, half smiling. “You are the proper person to ask me.” He turns to Heathcliff who has just come in. “You see, sir, I am come, according to promise! I exclaimed, assuming the cheerful; “and I fear I shall be weather-bound for half an hour, if you can afford me shelter during that space.”

“Half an hour?’ he said, shaking the white flakes from his clothes; ‘I wonder you should select the thick of a snow-storm to ramble about in. Do you know that you run a risk of being lost in the marshes? People familiar with these moors often miss their road on such evenings; and I can tell you there is no chance of a change at present.’”

“Perhaps I can get a guide among your lads, and he might stay at the Grange till morning – could you spare me one?”

“No, I could not.”

Not only does Lockwood mistake the dead rabbits for live kittens, he misreads Heathcliff's temperament and talks as if he is a caring host.

But Heathcliff does, reluctantly, offer him a cup of tea.

“It is strange,” I began, in the interval of swallowing one cup of tea and receiving another – “it is strange how custom can mould our tastes and ideas: many could not imagine the existence of happiness in a life of such complete exile from the world as you spend, Mr. Heathcliff; yet, I'll venture to say, that, surrounded by your family, and with your amiable lady as the presiding genius over your home and heart – ”

“My amiable lady!” he interrupted, with an almost diabolical sneer on his face. ‘Where is she – my amiable lady?’

“Mrs. Heathcliff, your wife, I mean.”

Oh dear, Lockwood has put his foot in the bog again. But Heathcliff mistakes Lockwood’s meaning and interprets this as referring to Cathy, the wife he had in spirit.

“Well, yes – oh, you would intimate that her spirit has taken the post of ministering angel, and guards the fortunes of Wuthering Heights, even when her body is gone. Is that it?’

Perceiving myself in a blunder, I attempted to correct it. I might have seen there was too great a disparity between the ages of the parties to make it likely that they were man and wife. Then it flashed on me – The clown at my elbow, who is drinking his tea out of a basin and eating his bread with unwashed hands, may be her husband.

“Mrs. Heathcliff is my daughter-in-law,’ said Heathcliff, corroborating my surmise. He turned, as he spoke, a peculiar look in her direction: a look of hatred; unless he has a most perverse set of facial muscles that will not, like those of other people, interpret the language of his soul.

‘Ah, certainly – I see now: you are the favoured possessor of the beneficent fairy,’ I remarked, turning to my neighbour.

Oh dear, Lockwood is now up to his armpits in the bog.

This was worse than before: the youth grew crimson, and clenched his fist, with every appearance of a meditated assault.

“Unhappy in your conjectures, sir,” observed my host; “we neither of us have the privilege of owning your good fairy; her mate is dead. I said she was my daughter-in-law: therefore, she must have married my son.’

“And this young man is – ”

“Not my son, assuredly.”

Lockwood has narrowly escaped being drowned in the bog altogether.

“My name is Hareton Earnshaw,” growled the other; “and I'd counsel you to respect it!”

Anne, too is capable of humour, although hers is much softer. Again she doesn't season her novels with an abundance of humour. But the scene of the Christmas Rose is quite amusing. Here we have the humour of misunderstanding. Gilbert has rediscovered Helen, after her husband has died, but discovers that her newly inherited wealth has put her beyond reach as a possible wife. He speaks to her as he takes leave – forever. She has other ideas.

“Gilbert, what is the matter with you? – why are you so changed?”

“I am not changed, Helen – unfortunately I am as keen and passionate as ever – it is not I, it is circumstances that are changed.”

“What circumstances? Do tell me!”

“I will confess that I came here for the purpose of seeing you, but I did not know that this estate was yours until enlightened on the subject of your inheritance by the conversation of two fellow-passengers in the last stage of my journey; and then I saw at once the folly of the hopes I had cherished, and the madness of retaining them a moment longer; and though I alighted at your gates, I determined not to enter within them; I lingered a few minutes to see the place, but was fully resolved to return without seeing its mistress.”

“And if my aunt and I had not been just returning from our morning drive, I should have seen and heard no more of you?”

“I thought it would be better for both that we should not meet. I thought an interview would only disturb your peace and madden me. But I am glad, now, of this opportunity of seeing you once more and knowing that you have not forgotten me, and of assuring you that I shall never cease to remember you.”

Gilbert rises and offers Helen his hand as he prepares to leave. Helen takes Gilbert's hand and doesn't let it go. “Are you going already?” Why should I stay any longer?

“You told me you were not changed, you are – very much so.”

“No, Mrs. Huntingdon, I only ought to be.”

“Do you mean to maintain that you have the same regard for me that you had when last we met?”

“I have; but it would be wrong to talk of it now.”

“It was wrong to talk of it then, Gilbert; it would not now – unless to do so would be to violate the truth.” Helen throws up the window and looks out. She plucks a Christmas-rose that was growing upon the little shrub without. She picks it, gently dashes the glittering powder from its leaves and puts it to her lips.

“This rose is not so fragrant as a summer flower, but it has stood through hardships none of them could bear: the cold rain of winter has sufficed to nourish it, and its faint sun to warm it; the bleak winds have not blanched it, or broken its stem, and the keen frost has not blighted it. Look, Gilbert, it is still fresh and blooming as a flower can be, with the cold snow even now on its petals. – Will you have it?”

Gilbert holds out his hand. Helen lays the rose across his hand. Distracted by his thoughts Gilbert doesn't close his fingers on it. Helen mistakes this as indifference and snatches the rose from Gilbert and throws it out on to the snow, shuts the window and withdraws to the fire.

"Helen, what means this?"

"You did not understand my gift, or, what is worse, you despised it. I'm sorry I gave it you; but since I did make such a mistake, the only remedy I could think of was to take it away."

"You misunderstood me cruelly."

Gilbert opens the window again, leaps out, picks up the flower and brings in to her. Some good old fashioned slapstick.

"I implore you to give it to me again. I will keep it forever for your sake, and prize it more highly than anything in the world I possess."

Helen takes it in her hand. "And will this content you?"

"It shall. There, then; take it."

The humour in *Jane Eyre* is also somewhat subdued. The bold conversations between Rochester and Jane bring a wry smile to our faces. But the closest we ever come to laughing out loud is Mr Brocklehurst's interview with young Jane. She is about to be sent to Lowood School and Mr Brocklehurst reminds her that if she has any ambitions to go to heaven she had better be a meek well-behaved little girl. But Jane is far from meek.

"Your name, little girl?"

"Jane Eyre, sir."

In uttering these words I looked up: he seemed to me a tall gentleman; but then I was very little; his features were large, and they and all the lines of his frame were equally harsh and prim.

"Well, Jane Eyre, and are you a good child?"

Impossible to reply to this in the affirmative: my little world held a contrary opinion: I was silent. Mrs. Reed answered for me: "perhaps the less said on that subject the better, Mr. Brocklehurst."

"Sorry indeed to hear it! she and I must have some talk;" and bending from the perpendicular, he installed his person in the arm-chair opposite Mrs. Reed's. "Come here," he said.

I stepped across the rug; he placed me square and straight before him. What a face he had, now that it was almost on a level with mine! what a great nose! and what a mouth! and what large prominent teeth!

Are we meant to think of him as the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*?

“No sight so sad as that of a naughty child,” he began, “especially a naughty little girl. Do you know where the wicked go after death?”

“They go to hell,” was my ready and orthodox answer.

“And what is hell? Can you tell me that?”

“A pit full of fire.”

“And should you like to fall into that pit, and to be burning there forever?”

“No, sir.”

“What must you do to avoid it?”

The expected answer, of course, is “I must try to be a good and obedient child”, but Jane is an unusual child. Here we have the humour of the unexpected.

I deliberated a moment. “I must keep in good health, and not die.”

Branwell’s humour was a macabre humour. In the latter part of his life he was obsessed with Death, but loved to poke fun at Death as can be seen in this example where Death thumbs his nose at Branwell.



