**Abstract:**

This article surveys May Sinclair’s writing on the Brontë sisters in order to chart her revisionist impulse with relation to their reputation, her anxiety about her own literary reputation, genius in women and intellectual self-sufficiency. I argue that in her insistence on the significance of Haworth and the moors as “background” to the sisters’ lives and her careful portrayal of each sister as either “savage” or “half savage” she is establishing the sisters as Romantic geniuses on the one hand and as dissocialised and self-sufficient elemental figures on the other. I move from an examination of Sinclair’s revisioning of Gaskell’s Brontë myth and her engagement with Clement Shorter and the Héger-Brussels question, to a reading of two of her novels in which Sinclair’s own version of the Brontë myth – the untamed intellect of the genius woman in communion with the landscape – is explored. I will draw on the new materialism of recent feminist ecocriticism to argue that, for Sinclair, the cultural and intellectual work of writing is environmentally and materially informed. Sinclair is at pains to show that the Brontë sisters themselves, and Sinclair’s own fictional writer-heroines, can escape essentially uncompromised from domestic and social materiality, and maintain communion with a different kind of materiality: the sacred materiality of landscape.

**May Sinclair and the Brontë Myth: Rewilding and Dissocialising Charlotte.**

May Sinclair is best known now as the author of *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919) and *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* (1922). She is also indirectly known as the first critic to apply the psychological term “stream of consciousness” to fiction in her review of Dorothy Richardson’s *Pilgrimage* (1918).[[1]](#endnote-1) Sinclair’s oeuvre, however, is considerably more diverse than these highlights indicate. She wrote twenty-one novels, several novellas, many pieces of short fiction (some collected in volumes and some not), collections of poetry (particularly in her early career) and even a long novella-poem. Her two books of philosophy are receiving new critical attention for their interventions into British Idealism and the New Realism.[[2]](#endnote-2) She published a good deal of occasional criticism of contemporary writers, including reviews of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, H.D., Richard Aldington and F.S. Flint. Her most sustained flight of literary criticism, though, was her series of critical and appreciative commentaries on the lives and works of the Brontë sisters. She wrote introductions to the Everyman series of Brontë novels with *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley* appearing in 1908; *Villette* in 1909; *The Professor* in 1910; *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in 1914 and *Wuthering Heights* in 1921, as well as an introduction to Elizabeth Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* in 1908. Before she had finished writing this series of introductions, she produced, in response to a request from her publisher Constable for a “short essay”, a biography of the sisters entitled *The Three Brontës* (1912).[[3]](#endnote-3) Because Sinclair’s Brontë criticism constitutes her largest body of critical work on the same subject(s), it has proved interesting and fertile ground for critics interested in the development of Sinclair’s literary aesthetics and her views on literary celebrity, genius, identity and gender politics. This criticism, while useful, misses an important feature of Sinclair’s Brontë myth: the importance of landscape. In Sinclair’s evaluation the Brontë sisters are “half-savage” and physically situated in an untamed environment.[[4]](#endnote-4) Their genius, too, is coded as uncivilized and natural, the “wild unknown thing” stirring within each sister, beatings its “wings.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Sinclair works to disentangle each sister from their more social and worldly concerns and re-establish them as a part of their moorland setting. Her Brontë sisters are not simply disconnected minds with big ideas and bigger passions, they are embodied subjects, in communion with a fierce and awe-inspiring landscape.

I want to distinguish here between social environment – what Sinclair calls in *The Three Brontës* “the material event” – and social-domestic materiality on the one hand and the materiality of landscape on the other.[[6]](#endnote-6) In Sinclair’s writings on the Brontës and in her fiction, social and domestic material realities both have a pervasive and corroding influence on genius, while the romanticised wild and *unsocialised* environment is a kind of sacred materiality to be cherished. I read this in line with Stacy Alaimo’s theory of trans-corporeality in *Bodily Natures*, in which the human subject is “inextricably connected with material worlds,” as well as her argument in *Undomesticated Ground* that, for many feminist writers trying to challenge the concept of “woman” as “mired in nature” and therefore uncultured and unsophisticated, nature *qua* landscape was a problematic battleground. Alaimo posits that, for some of the authors in her study, “it is *culture* that enforces rigid notions of gender, while nature is imagined as a space utterly free from such confining concepts, values, and roles.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Sinclair’s mission is not dissimilar to that of Alaimo’s women writers in the 1930s: to both establish the bodies and minds of the Brontë sisters as dependent on and inextricable from their landscape, and to show that this enmeshed corporeal ontology in their life and work enables a rethinking of nature and culture as not simple binaries but as each reliant on the other. The mission here is a feminist one and it is one of reputational reclamation. My reading of Sinclair’s Brontë criticism in this article will then inform a reading of *The Creators* (1910) and *The Three Sisters* (1914) in which the same effort is made to rewild and dissocialise the female protagonists.

**Source Texts: Elizabeth Gaskell and Clement Shorter**

Each of Sinclair’s Brontë pieces presents a definite Romantic image of the three sisters as self-sufficient geniuses on the one hand (their genius as springing from within), and as a sorority of love and support on the other. Each of these writings is also careful to emphasise that the Brontë sisters belonged to, and still, in death, belong to Haworth. Their genius, although finding its source within the bodies of the sisters themselves, was developed through communion with the wildness of the moors and the stark gloom of the graveyard. Emily, Sinclair insists, with her “passionate adoration of the earth, adoration and passion fiercer than any pagan knew” and her reluctance to leave Haworth for long periods, was both materially and spiritually attached.[[8]](#endnote-8) Charlotte, she says, was no less attached because intellectually curious and drawn away to Brussels; Anne “languished” away from home.[[9]](#endnote-9) Branwell, Sinclair says, “was not a poet like his sisters, and moors meant nothing to him.”[[10]](#endnote-10) In her biography of the Brontë sisters – note that the title, *The Three Brontës*, excludes Branwell – Sinclair constructs a literary identity for the writers which is Romantic in its emphasis on the poetry of wildness and the relationship between genius and landscape, and Gothic in its austerity and morbidity. In making these connections, however, she does not want to establish the Brontës as a part of the Romantic or Gothic tradition, or indeed, as influenced by anyone or anything but themselves, each other, and their landscape. She wants, instead, to establish the sisters as powerful elemental figures. In this Sinclair in part follows Elizabeth Gaskell, whose 1857 *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* was Sinclair’s first introduction to the sisters. Gaskell’s biography builds up a Romantic and Gothic picture of Haworth in order to stress the isolation of the family, and to reconcile the domestic Charlotte Brontë with the writer Currer Bell, to excuse the unfeminine genius of the writer.[[11]](#endnote-11) In Deborah Wynne’s analysis of this work and its after-effects, Gaskell’s “presentation of Brontë as a tiny, frail woman, a domestic and dutiful daughter who was also strong in moral probity and a boldly free spirit associated with the moors, helped readers to negotiate these apparent contradictions after her death.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Whereas Gaskell’s emphasis is on the domestic Charlotte as redeeming the “boldly free” Currer, Sinclair’s repurposing of the Gaskell myth adopts this idea of a Romanticised and Gothic Haworth (the moors rather more than the house) in order to construct a version of Charlotte which is more wild than domestic. She adopts Gaskell’s trope of the moor-identified free spirit but argues against her version of Charlotte as “a tiny, frail woman.” All three Brontës, she says, “were not, they could not have been, the sedentary, unwholesome little creatures they might seem to be”:

The girls were kept hard at work with their thin arms, brushing carpets, dusting furniture, and making beds. And for play they tramped the moors with their brother; they breasted the keen and stormy weather; the sun, the moon, the stars, and the winds knew them; and it is of these fierce, radiant, elemental things that Charlotte and Emily wrote as no women before them had ever written. Conceive the vitality and energy implied in such a life; and think, if you can, of these two as puny, myopic victims of the lust of literature.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Sinclair’s Brontë sisters are not frail and they are not vulnerable. They “tramp” and “breast” their landscape and are recognised by that same landscape as materially, trans-corporeally, a part of itself. Gaskell uses environment (domestic; social) to marginalise the writerly identity of Charlotte; Sinclair uses environment (nature; elemental) to place that writerly identity front and centre. Here I want to examine why Sinclair chose to use the Gaskellian Brontë myth as a blueprint for her own writings on the three sisters, and why she chose to shift the focus of the myth from domesticity to nature.

Jane Silvey’s article for *May Sinclair: Moving Towards the Modern* (2006) argues that in the lives of the Brontës the young Sinclair found a model for her literary and intellectual aspirations. As Silvey points out, Sinclair’s biography of the Brontës is “not so much a biography as a lively critique of much of the biographical writings and theories about the Brontës published in the years following the publication of *The Life*.”[[14]](#endnote-14) Elizabeth Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* is Sinclair’s ur-text and chief influence. It was the medium through which Sinclair discovered the sisters as a child and was no less influential to her understanding of them in adulthood. Gaskell creates, in her biography, a novelistic image of Haworth; the graveyard just outside the house and the moors just beyond. The first section of the biography is an ethnographic account of Haworth, explaining Yorkshire to a metropolitan audience, which comes to a close with a dramatic zoom in on Haworth itself:

crowned with wild, bleak moors—grand, from the ideas of solitude and loneliness which they suggest, or oppressive from the feeling which they give of being pent-up by some monotonous and illimitable barrier, according to the mood of mind in which the spectator may be.[[15]](#endnote-15)

It is clear from the beginning that the landscape surrounding Haworth is going to be made to stand for Gaskell’s particular idea of the significance of the lives of the three sisters: solitude and loneliness is key to this picture; sometimes this is “grand” and inspiring, sometimes it is “monotonous” and constraining. The biography as a whole is punctuated with scenic descriptions of the wild, unforgiving but desolately Romantic landscape around and behind the Brontës’ home. It is apparent from Gaskell’s writing that we are meant to see each sister only in terms of their background. Haworth explains them.

Sinclair follows Gaskell in speaking, deliberately and exhaustively, of the atmosphere of Haworth Parsonage, the wildness of the moors surrounding it, and the relationship each sister had with these places and spaces. In her picturing of Haworth, she is careful to show how integral the environment is to the sisters’ intellectual, spiritual, and physical development. There is a kind of mystical and sensual connection between each sister and their landscape which is both spiritual (connected to the inner life, inspiration and genius) and bodily (with an emphasis on the physical body walking *through* the landscape or inhabiting a space). The mixture here—mystical and sensual; spiritual and corporeal—is one that Sinclair declines to theorize. She says of Emily: “You may call her what you will—Pagan, transcendentalist, mystic and worshipper of earth, she slips from all your formulas.”[[16]](#endnote-16) Charlotte, too, is all these things, if less boldly so than Emily. In writing of all three sisters together some of Emily’s peculiar mix of the spiritual and material adheres to both Anne and Charlotte. They are, all three, in and of Haworth. The very first line of Sinclair’s biography reads “It is impossible to write of the three Brontës and forget the place they lived in.” She goes on:

It is the genius of the Brontës that made their place immortal; but it is the soul of the place that made their genius what it is. You cannot exaggerate its importance. They drank and were saturated with Haworth. When they left it they hungered and thirsted for it; they sickened till the hour of their return. […] Their souls are henceforth no more to be disentangled from its soul than their bodies from its earth.[[17]](#endnote-17)

In part this is a spiritual connection, with the souls of the sisters explicitly commingled with the “soul” of their environment. But there is also an emphasised corporeality in the metaphor of the place as food and drink for the bodies of the authors, without which their physicality is rendered weak.. In a certain sense this emphasis on the entanglement of body and soil anticipates the “trans-corporeality” of Stacy Alaimo’s new materialist ecocriticism, where “‘the environment’ is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves.”[[18]](#endnote-18) In our corporeality we are always already a part of the environment we inhabit and are unavoidably “the very stuff of the messy, contingent, emergent mix of the material world.”[[19]](#endnote-19) This is apparent, for Sinclair, in the lives of the Brontës but in death a more terrible trans-corporeality is realised: the sisters have become literally part of the soil

Towards the end of *The Three Brontës*, Sinclair returns to the beginning. She tells the story of her first encounter with the Brontë sisters, as a child, coming across a copy of *The Life*:

The title-page was adorned with one bad wood-cut that showed a grim, plain house standing obliquely to a churchyard packed with tombstones, tombstones upright and flat, and slanting at all angles. In the foreground was a haycock, where the grave grass had been mown. I do not know how the artist, whose resources were of the slenderest, contrived to get his overwhelming but fascinating effect of moorland solitude, of black-grey nakedness and abiding gloom. But he certainly got it and gave it. There was one other picture, representing a memorial tablet.[[20]](#endnote-20)

The account is significant, as Silvey says, because “This initial reading must have caused a shock of recognition of shared ambitions, of hidden lives, of secret inner selves”; “her imagination became possessed by the power of the Brontë myth at an early and impressionable age.”[[21]](#endnote-21) What I find significant, though, is that this first impression was of a picture of Haworth, and not of the characters who inhabited Haworth. The elements of the biography that stayed with Sinclair are similarly pictorial: “I knew every corner of that house. I have an impression (it is probably a wrong one) of a flagged path going right down from the Parsonage door through another door and plunging among the tombs. […] I saw six little Brontë babies lost in the space of the illimitable moors. They went over rough stones and walls and mountain torrents; their absurd petticoats were blown upwards by the wind, and their feet were tangled in the heather. They struggled and struggled, and yet were in an ecstasy that I could well understand.”[[22]](#endnote-22) She recalls that she read the “schooldays” section carefully but found Brussels “dull” and Héger “tiresome.” She “skipped all the London part” and remembered Charlotte only in her context as part of “Haworth and the moors.” The characters are presented initially only as figures in a landscape: those six “babies” are pictured hiking on—and finding themselves entangled with—the moors, which are wild and “rough” but in some ways sublime. When the sisters emerge as individuals in Sinclair’s account, they do so with relation to this background, but also in terms of the myths about themselves perpetuated first by Charlotte and later by Gaskell.

As Lucasta Miller points out in *The Brontë Myth*, Charlotte was “her own mythologiser,” creating two different and difficult to reconcile myths of the solitary woman artist. Firstly there is “the positive myth of female self-creation” presented in her novels, where the heroines Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe “forge their own sense of selfhood in conflict with their social environment.” The second myth was that of the “quiet and trembling creature, reared in total seclusion, a martyr to duty and a model of Victorian femininity, whose sins against convention, if she had unwittingly committed any, could be explained away by her isolated upbringing and the suffering she had endured.”[[23]](#endnote-23) According to Miller, Gaskell’s biography then grappled with these two performative constructs in turn, and tended to favour the latter over the former: “when she got to know Charlotte she was particularly eager to uncover evidence of self-sacrifice and femininity precisely because she feared that Currer Bell was lacking in these qualities.”[[24]](#endnote-24) In so far as Charlotte Brontë creates any mythology about the moorland setting she hails from, it is with relation to her sister Emily rather than with relation to herself. Emily, she says in her 1850 preface to *Wuthering Heights*, was “a native and nursling of the moors […] her native hills were far more to her than a spectacle; they were what she lived in, and by, as much as the wild birds, their tenants, or as the heather, their produce.”[[25]](#endnote-25) Emily is, in other words, wild and unsocialised. She is a creature born of the landscape and not, as trans-corporeal subject, to be extricated from it; she is “not naturally gregarious” and observes the natives of the town but does not talk to them.[[26]](#endnote-26) Emily does not attain selfhood “in conflict” with her “social environment”; she abjures the social and is one with the unsocial *natural* environment.

Gaskell happily follows Charlotte in her creation of Emily as a pagan figure at one with her native moors. She is careful, though, to show that Charlotte, ostensibly the topic of the biography, was not so wild or as unsocial as her sister. Sinclair also treats each sister differently. Anne is not given as much attention as Charlotte and Emily, but all three are endowed with a degree of wildness which is not in evidence in Gaskell’s account. Sinclair allows for the domesticity and attention to duty evident in the lives of all three sisters, but in her descriptions of Charlotte and Emily, in particular, she reads through and beyond that domesticity. She says in her biography that she has a particularly clear image of Emily:

Emily who was tall and strong and unconquerable; Emily who loved animals, and loved the moors; Emily and Keeper, that marvellous dog; Emily kneading bread with her book propped before her; Emily who was Ellis Bell, listening contemptuously to the reviews of *Wuthering Heights*; Emily stitching at the long seam with dying fingers; and Emily dead, carried down the long, flagged path, with Keeper following in the mourner’s train.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Sinclair is careful to follow this picture of Emily with a larger point. She says that through and behind all these impressions is something more “mysterious, but omnipotently alive,” the “genius” of those Brontë sisters.[[28]](#endnote-28) This genius is important, and Sinclair’s perception of it allows her in her writings on the sisters to formulate an account of women’s creativity that makes space for her own “genius.” However, it is striking that before Sinclair comes to speak of genius she lingers on the material details of the sisters’ lives. Emily is shown to be both intellectual, in her reading and her scorn for her critics (as Ellis Bell), and practically domestic in her bread-making and her sewing (as Emily Brontë). Gaskell’s version of this bread-making scene places emphasis on the triumph of the domestic over the intellectual. Emily may be dividing her attention two ways, “but no study, however interesting, interfered with the goodness of the bread, which was always light and excellent.”[[29]](#endnote-29) Sinclair’s biography does not insist on the quality of the bread.

Emily is fixed in Sinclair’s mind as a “vivid” and uncompromising figure: “You see her tall and slender, in her rough clothes, tramping the moors with the form and the step of a virile adolescent.”[[30]](#endnote-30) Charlotte is, by contrast, more dependent on, and affected by, the exterior “material event”: “Charlotte’s was not by any means ‘a chainless soul.’ It struggled and hankered after the unattainable.”[[31]](#endnote-31) Despite this compromise on Charlotte’s part, however, Sinclair reiterates her connection to Haworth and specifically to the landscape of Haworth:

you see Charlotte Brontë’s figure for ever simple and beautiful and great; behind her for ever the black-grey setting of her village and the purple of her moors. That greatness and beauty and simplicity is destroyed by any effort to detach her from her background. She may seem susceptible to the alien influence of exile; but it is as an exile that she suffers; and her most inspired moments are her moments of return.[[32]](#endnote-32)

There is a great effort being made here, on Sinclair’s part, to raise Charlotte’s self-sufficiency, her wildness and her trans-corporeal environmental materiality almost up to the heights attained by her sister Emily. The more worldly sister is repatriated and in the process rewilded and dissocialised. Sinclair takes Charlotte’s myth of Emily and turns it back upon its author, creating a Charlotte who is much more entangled with the landscape of Haworth than in either Charlotte’s version of herself or Gaskell’s. The landscape here serves, as for Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy’s “green modernists” “as a sphere of action outside social construction and social cooptation;” an escape from social-domestic materiality and thus a productive space for an exploration of female artistic independence.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Sinclair is critical of Gaskell’s biography in more explicit terms elsewhere. In her introduction to the Everyman edition she runs through what she perceives as the book’s flaws: too much information is given about Branwell’s “moral insufficiency” and there is too much license with regards to fact – Sinclair’s example is Branwell’s relationship with Mrs Robinson, which she believes to be Gaskell’s invention – and the sensitivities of people still alive. More seriously, and more pertinently for this study, Sinclair thinks that Gaskell has not done justice to Charlotte as writer. She says “There have been finer appreciations of the genius of Charlotte Brontë than anything given us by Mrs. Gaskell. We get a better judgment of Charlotte as a writer from Mr. Clement Shorter. He is a most exact, a most skilful appraiser of her gift.”[[34]](#endnote-34) On the other hand, Gaskell’s acquaintance with Charlotte enables a personal (if novelistic) portrait in which every so often:

you are caught with some spontaneous movement of the real woman, and Charlotte lives for you in her half-savage moorland shyness and her charm, in her grace and goodness, in her heroic strength. Mrs. Gaskell has the art to make all else subservient to this.[[35]](#endnote-35)

In these criticisms, and this praise, we see what matters to Sinclair. She is worried about truth and about offence; she regrets that Gaskell’s “beautiful and guileless mid-Victorian mind” led her to distortions in order to excuse Charlotte Brontë’s perceived “coarseness.”[[36]](#endnote-36) She notes what later critics have also noted in terms of Gaskell’s insubstantial consideration of Charlotte’s writing process or critical appreciation of her work (Gaskell notoriously refuses to “write an analysis” of *Jane Eyre*).[[37]](#endnote-37) Despite what she perceives as Gaskell’s failings Sinclair insists that Charlotte’s genius is sufficiently communicated, and that we see the “real” Charlotte, crucially the Charlotte that despite “grace and goodness” is strong, wild, and unsocialised; “half-savage” and shy. Again, this Charlotte is more akin to Gaskell’s and Charlotte’s own Emily myth than to any version of Charlotte hitherto put forward.

One other key influence on Sinclair’s *The Three Brontës* is Clement Shorter, whose *Charlotte Brontë and her Circle* was published in 1896, *Charlotte Brontë and her Sisters* in 1905, and *The Brontës: Life and Letters* in 1908, this last book an expansion of the first, containing “a quantity of extremely valuable new material […] including many hitherto unpublished letters.”[[38]](#endnote-38) Sinclair has points of agreement and points of disagreement with Shorter, and each of these points is related to the wider vision she has of the Brontës and of what they stand for. As we have seen, she admires Shorter’s attention to Brontë as a writer. She also, in her biography, praises Shorter for refusing to countenance that Charlotte was in love with Monsieur Héger in Belgium. Shorter does do his best to dismiss this theory:

This second visit of Charlotte Brontë to Brussels has given rise to much speculation, some of it of not the pleasantest kind.  It is well to face the point bluntly, for it has been more than once implied that Charlotte Brontë was in love with M. Héger, as her prototype Lucy Snowe was in love with Paul Emanuel.  The assumption, which is absolutely groundless, has had certain plausible points in its favour, not the least obvious, of course, being the inclination to read autobiography into every line of Charlotte Brontë’s writings.[[39]](#endnote-39)

It is notable in Shorter that the impulse to deny a romantic motivation for Charlotte’s return to Brussels is because the idea of an extramarital passion is not “pleasant.” He is worried, as Gaskell was before him, about accusations of “coarseness.”

Sinclair deliberately and carefully thanks Clement Shorter, in *The Three Brontës*, for having “dealt so admirably with outrageous legends.”[[40]](#endnote-40) She puts forward her own interpretation of events: Charlotte’s impulse was towards getting away as a form of “self-development,” which her genius required; either she or Emily needed to leave Haworth and make a living and it couldn’t be Emily; both Charlotte’s conscience and her homesickness tended to draw her back home rather than away, to Brussels.[[41]](#endnote-41) She quotes letters in which Charlotte cries out her homesickness and she calls Brussels a “strange and hostile soil” in which both her genius and the lesser “genius for friendship” flourished “with astounding vitality” *despite* the circumstances.[[42]](#endnote-42)

Sinclair more emphaticallydisagrees with Shorter’s assertion that the long stay in Brussels made Charlotte a writer. He says in *Charlotte Brontë and her Circle* that “Had not the impulse come to Charlotte Brontëto add somewhat to her scholastic achievements by a sojourn in Brussels, our literature would have lost that powerful novel *Villette*, and the singularly charming *Professor*.”[[43]](#endnote-43) He says in his later and more chatty *Charlotte Brontë and her Sisters* that the “Brussels episode was the turning-point of Charlotte Brontë’s career […] M. Héger kindled her intellectual impulses, and that was no small thing.”[[44]](#endnote-44) Despite there being no romantic attachment, it is clear, to Shorter, that Charlotte found in Héger an intellectual mentor. In answer to this, Sinclair again invokes the greater power of Haworth. For the critics, Sinclair says, “the sojourn in Brussels will stand as the turning-point in Charlotte Brontë’s career. Yet for her, long afterwards, Brussels must have stood as the danger threatening it. She would have said, I think, that her sojourn in Haworth was the starting point.”[[45]](#endnote-45) She says too that Brussels may have “wrung from her her greatest book, *Villette*. But Haworth, I think, would have wrung from her another, and perhaps a greater.”[[46]](#endnote-46) This point is not a throwaway argument to help bolster the supreme assertion that Charlotte was not dependent on any man, least of all Héger, for her romantic sensibility or for her literary genius. It is central to Sinclair’s estimation of the Brontë sisters and to the way she wishes their literary and personal reputation to be received. This point is so important to Sinclair’s project that she emphasises it, at length, in the original introduction to the biography:

If I have been inclined to undervalue certain things—“the sojourn in Brussels,” for instance—which others have conceived of the first importance, it is because I believe that it is always the inner life that counts, and that with the Brontës it supremely counted.

If I have passed over the London period too lightly, it is because I judge it extraneous and external. If I have tried, cruelly, to take from Charlotte the little beige gown that she wore at Mr. Thackeray’s dinner-party, it is because her home-made garments seem to suit her better. She is more herself in skirts that have brushed the moors and kept some of the soil of Haworth in their hem.

I may seem to have exaggerated her homesickness for Haworth. It may be said that Haworth was by no means Charlotte’s home as it was Emily’s. I’m aware that there were moments—hours—when she longed to get away from it. […] The fact remains that she was never happy away from it, and that in Haworth her genius found itself at home.[[47]](#endnote-47)

She will not countenance that the “sojourn in Brussels” (this phrase of Shorter’s, which functions as chapter heading in two of the three biographies, seems to have stuck a thorn into her imagination) did much for Charlotte because the inner life counts supremely. She will not allow the literary London life to taint Charlotte’s legend because she views it as too artificial – unlike the rustic wholesomeness of Charlotte’s Haworth-marked moor-walking dress – and too worldly.[[48]](#endnote-48) She does not apologise for any exaggeration of Charlotte’s homesickness because Haworth is the site of her genius. Again we see an emphasis on the permeable boundaries between the human and non-human—the trans-corporeal enmeshment of figure and landscape—with Charlotte’s skirt retaining, literally and symbolically, the soil of Haworth in its material.

Critics are still writing about Brussels in terms of a turning point in Charlotte’s life and career. Charlotte Mathieson, in fact, draws critical attention to Charlotte’s stay in Brussels precisely to overturn the Gaskell-myth of Haworth’s importance in terms of Charlotte’s feminine domesticity, saying that Brussels “provides a site where Charlotte could develop as an autonomous individual away from her sisters, the domestic space of home, and in a distinctly cosmopolitan setting.”[[49]](#endnote-49) Sinclair wants this same autonomy for Charlotte, but she wants it to come from within, and to be sustained by the landscape of Haworth. She does not want a “cosmopolitan setting” for her. Sinclair allows for the inner life to appear dependent on Haworth in a way that she will not allow it to be dependent on any other experience – foreign, intellectual, social, romantic.[[50]](#endnote-50)

**Rewilding the Artist: *The Creators and The Three Sisters***

May Sinclair’s *The Creators* was published in 1910, at which point she had published five of the seven introductions to the Everyman editions of the Brontë novels, and was beginning to work on the larger biography. It tells the story of five “creators” (all writers), who each struggle in different ways to balance their domestic, social or financial responsibilities with the demands of their “genius.” The three women creators, in particular, are hampered by their circumstances. We could read the character Nina Lempriere as an Emily Brontë, whose genius is described as “the genius of wild earth, an immortal of divinely pitiful virgin heart and healing hand; clear-eyed, swift-footed, a huntress of the woods and the mountains, a runner in the earth’s green depths, in the secret, enchanted ways.”[[51]](#endnote-51) It is Nina who leaves London when she needs to write and, when she does, writes something “‘magnificent’.” As one character comments: “‘Whenever that woman gets away and hides herself in some savage lair she invariably does a thing like this’”; “this” being a “‘masterpiece’” of a story.[[52]](#endnote-52) Where Charlotte in Sinclair’s introduction to *The Life* is “half-savage,” Nina, like Emily, is entirely savage. We could certainly see Laura Gunning as Anne Brontë: small, seemingly frail, industrious and pathetic.[[53]](#endnote-53) She has only a “small genius” and she works for others rather than herself. Significantly, she never really gets away from her squalid domesticity. She is, however, stronger than she looks: “Laura was cruel to her small genius. It was delicate, and she drove it with all the strength of her hard, indomitable will.”[[54]](#endnote-54) Jane Holland, as Charlotte-figure, is caught between. She begins in a solitary London apartment, where she can write and she can think, but she is continually caught at by people who want something from her, and she ends up married and a mother. Her genius begins to desert her. Her story is a cycle of escape and return, where each escape from circumstance enables a novel and the successful birth of each novel necessitates a return to domestic and social materiality. Silvey also reads the three women creators as Brontësque, and points out just how inconclusive Sinclair’s narrative is: “In Jane’s character, Sinclair explores the consequences of not making such a definite choice [as Nina does, for example], but of attempting instead to combine the writing life with the demands of family life […] Sinclair offers no easy answers to Jane’s predicament and shows her increasingly pressed in on all sides.”[[55]](#endnote-55)

Jane feels that she needs the intellectual and social stimulus that her London life, at least at the beginning of the novel, brings her. As she tries to explain to George Tanqueray, one of the male creators: “‘London does something to your brain. It jogs it and shakes it; and all the little ideas that had gone to sleep in their little cells get up and begin to dance as if they heard music, Everything wakes them up, the streams of people, the eyes and the faces.’”[[56]](#endnote-56) She also feels real desire and love for her husband when she marries, and love and a passionate attachment to her children when she has them. It is not easy for her to detach herself, as Nina does, from her domestic and social ties. The social ties are exciting, and give her material; the domestic ties are sacrosanct. However, repeatedly Jane expresses that she feels there is an essential difference between Jane Holland the author, and Jane Brodrick the married woman which is as stark as the difference between Currer Bell and Charlotte Brontë.[[57]](#endnote-57) The struggle for balance between the writerly Jane Holland and the motherly and wifely Jane Brodrick continues through *The Creators* and is never really resolved. However, there is one episode, towards the end of the novel, in which Jane finally finds some kind of resolution, albeit a temporary one.

Jane has convinced her husband that she needs several months in the countryside. She tells him “‘It’s not that I want to, but I must.’”[[58]](#endnote-58) She goes to George Tanqueray’s habitual retreat in Devon, a secluded house “cut off” from the nearest town and looking out on a lane rather than the countryside itself, to minimise distractions. Tanqueray says to Jinny explicitly that this is the purpose of the restricted view, because “You couldn’t trust Jinny on the open moor.”[[59]](#endnote-59) In the first week she doesn’t write, because she is pining for her loved ones. In the second week she doesn’t write because she has discovered the beauty of the moors:

Then the country claimed her. Dartmoor laid on her its magic of wild earth and wild skies. She tried to write and could not. Something older and more powerful than her genius had her. She suffered a resurgence of her youth, her young youth that sprang from the moors, and had had its joy in them and knew its joy again. It was on the moors that earth had most kinship and communion with the sky. […] Tanqueray was right. She was not to be trusted on the open moors. She was out of doors all day. And out of doors the Idea that had driven her forth withdrew itself. […] She was oppressed at times by a sense of utter frustration and futility. If this was all; if she was simply there enjoying herself, tramping the hills all day, a glorious animal set free; if she was not going to accomplish anything, then she had no business to be there at all.[[60]](#endnote-60)

She stays, however, and keeps walking. It occurs to her in her third week that “Nature” has a plan for her, to “weave over again the web of life so strained and worn” and “make her simple and strong, a new creature, with a clean vision and an imagination once more virgin to the world.”[[61]](#endnote-61) In other words, she needs to cast away all the daily domestic and social preoccupations that have harassed her for so long, and she needs to reconnect with the wild and unsocialised landscape. When she has successfully done this she will be able to write again. Sure enough, in the fifth week: “Walking back to the farm late one evening, the moors veiled from her passion by the half-darkness, her Idea came back to her.”[[62]](#endnote-62) She is sufficiently recovered now to write, but, on her return to the cottage, she finds George Tanqueray waiting for her and that is the end of her solitary flight. The two write and exchange manuscripts and the tone shifts to one of industry rather than of wild inspiration.

In *The Creators* Jane’s moorland stands for the kind of wild and mystical beauty that can restore the world-weary to the energy and passion of their youth. This is the role of the moors in Sinclair’s picturing of the lives of the Brontës, too. In Sinclair’s biography, if Emily is the pagan figure in complete creative harmony with the moorland, of which she is a part, Charlotte is the worldly figure who needs the moors to reconnect with a more innocent, wilder self. Nature in this sense is an antidote to the trials of domesticity, duty, and even pleasurable sociality. It does not inspire great writing but it recreates the energetic self who could then potentially write. This is also, in part, a discourse about health with relation to genius. Just as Sinclair is insistent on the Brontës’ physical and moral fitness – “Conceive the vitality and energy implied in such a life” – she insists that Jane Holland is not as neurotic as her husband’s family believe she must be, but fit and strong.[[63]](#endnote-63) As she as George walk on the hills together, they revel in their health and fitness: “rejoicing in the strong movement of their limbs”; “Distance was nothing to them.”[[64]](#endnote-64)

*The Three Sisters* (1914) is set in a moorland landscape similar to Haworth. The three sisters of the title live in a parsonage with their cranky and aged father, and they all three struggle against their repressive domestic situation. As Jean Radford points out in her introduction to the Virago edition, “the parallel with the Brontës’ situation and setting is both striking and deliberate.”[[65]](#endnote-65) However, the characters of the three sisters are unlike those of the Brontës; you cannot directly map the one fictional character onto a single Brontë sister. Gwenda, though, is the most like the mystical Emily and the wild Charlotte in her appreciation of the moors and her robust fitness: “She flashed by like a huntress, like Artemis carrying the young moon on her forehead”; “short-skirted and wild […] half-savage, divinely shy”;[[66]](#endnote-66) “She shared the earth’s silence and the throbbing passion of the earth”; she is “born for the wild open air and for youth and strength and freedom.”[[67]](#endnote-67) We see here the repetition of several of Sinclair’s key terms for the Brontë sisters. Gwenda, like Nina, is figured as a virgin huntress and pagan figure. She is wild. She is “half-savage,” like Charlotte, rather than full “savage” like Emily and Nina. She “shares” affective moments with the landscape, as an inevitable exchange between human and non-human.

The beginning of *The Three Sisters* opens similarly to both Gaskell’s and Sinclair’s biographies of the Brontës. The whole of the first chapter is a Romantic-Gothic description of the landscape, the village, and the parsonage:

North of east, in the bottom, where the road dropt from the High Moor, is the village of Garth in Garthdale.

It crouches there with a crook of the dale behind and before it, between half-shut doors of the west and south. Under the mystery and terror of its solitude it crouches, like a beaten thing, cowering from its topmost roof to the bowed back of its stone bridge.

[…]

And all these things of stone, the village, the Vicarage, the church, the churchyard and the gravestones of the dead are alike naked and black, blackened as if fire had passed over them. And in their grayness and their desolation they are one with each other and with the network of low walls that links them to the last solitary farm on the High Moor. And on the breast of the earth they show, one moment, solid as if hewn out of her heart, and another, slender and wind-blown as a tangle of gray thread on her green gown.[[68]](#endnote-68)

There are particularly striking similarities here with the description of Haworth with which Sinclair opens *The Three Brontës*:

the black-grey, naked village, bristling like a rampart on the clean edge of the moor; the street, dark and steep as a gully, climbing the hill to the Parsonage at the top; the small oblong house, naked and grey, hemmed in on two sides by the graveyard, its five windows flush with the wall, staring at the graveyard where the tombstones, grey and naked, are set so close that the grass hardly grows between.[[69]](#endnote-69)

In both descriptions, in both texts, everything is black, grey and naked. It is striking particularly that the word “naked,” which appears only once in the fictional description, is repeated three times in the biography’s description: the village is “black-grey, naked”; the house is “naked and grey”; the tombstones are “grey and naked.” Sinclair is trying to hold in tension the twin ideas of harshness and vulnerability that she absorbed in her first reading of Gaskell.

The village of Garth in the valley of Garthdale, however, is not primarily based on Haworth. It is based on the village of Arkengarthdale, in the valley of Arkengarthdale, about forty-five minutes’ walk from Reeth in North Yorkshire, where Sinclair was staying at the time.[[70]](#endnote-70) We know this from a postcard to that other Brontë biographer, Clement Shorter, to whom Sinclair was writing periodically between 1911 and 1923. The correspondence begins with some simple requests for permission to quote copyrighted material of Shorter’s in *The Three Brontës*, and continues in terms of their shared interest in the sisters. On December 9, 1911, she writes to tell Shorter that “I’m afraid you won’t agree with me on one or two points – Brussels, for instance.” On June 19, 1912 she gives thanks for Shorter’s “splendid review” of her biography and for “the sweet temper in which you have met what you call my ‘chiding’.” In later letters she accepts Shorter’s invitation to visit and look at his “Brontë relics” and comments politely on his wife’s poetry, which has been sent for criticism. In April 1916, she sends him a postcard of Arkengarthdale, with an “X” drawn on the photograph of the village, and the following explanatory note on the back: “This picture is the scene of ‘The Three Sisters’. The marked house is The Vicarage. The hills are really bigger & higher than the photograph shows them.”[[71]](#endnote-71)

**[Figure 1]**

The vicarage in the photograph is firmly placed in the valley, which accounts for the difference between Sinclair’s description of the parsonage in Haworth “at the top” of the imposing hills and the vicarage and town in *The Three Sisters* cowering in the shadow of those imposing hills. Sinclair’s insistence on the size of the hills is an insistence on their wild savage grandeur. The fictional Garthdale appears in other novels too. Mary’s family in *Mary Olivier* move to a village called Morfe in Yorkshire, which is directly modelled on Reeth. Mary, like Gwenda, walks along Greffington Edge, which is “a wild country, caught in the net of the stone walls.” The moors there are “Burnt patches. Tongues of heather, twisted and pointed, picked clean by fire, flickering grey over black earth.”[[72]](#endnote-72) Again and again the moors and the villages are pictured as black, grey, and ravaged by fire. Mary’s walks, like Jane’s and Gwenda’s, and like Charlotte’s and Emily’s, are characterised by both a sense of exaltation in her communion with the landscape and exultation in her physical fitness.

**Conclusion: Reconciliations**

Sinclair emphasises the physical fitness of each of her moor-walking characters – and the Brontës in this sense are also fictional characters – in part to defend them against charges of morbidity or pitiful frailty. They need this defence because so much else in these texts *is* morbid. Suzanne Raitt draws attention to this contradiction:

Sinclair’s investments in the Brontë sisters were contradictory and over-determined. On the one hand, she was anxious to protect them from posterity’s pity […]. But she was also obsessed with the idea of Emily’s early death, and with this figure who could not be laid to rest even decades after she was buried.[[73]](#endnote-73)

There is a tension, then, between the repeated invocation of the memorial tablets in Haworth church, the insistence of the black and grey of Haworth, the Parsonage and the graveyard, and the strong, vigorous, intellectually and physically health figures of the sisters themselves.

The key to resolving this tension lies in Sinclair’s use of the Haworth story, as borrowed from Gaskell, to emphasise the trans-corporality of the sisters and their landscape. The particular landscape of the Brontë sisters is a powerful one, which can simultaneously inspire awe and wonder, inspire passion and literary ideas, and function as health-restorative. Because the landscape itself is simultaneously bleak and magnificent, the lives of the sisters who belong to and *are part of* that landscape can also be both bleak and magnificent. The lives of her fictional women writers can also be redeemed by this connection with place with all its contradictions: naked but imposing, harsh and vulnerable, inhospitable and beautiful.

Sinclair’s critical writings on the Brontës constitute an important intervention into the posthumous reputation of the sisters. It was crucial for Sinclair to establish not just Emily but Charlotte as self-sufficient and powerful, and she found the myth of Haworth as wild moorland landscape to be a useful way of doing this. Sinclair’s Brontës are domestic when they need to be, and immaterially mystical and virginal at times, but more often they are grounded in the sacred material. The trope of the “half-savage” elemental woman resurfaces time and again in Sinclair’s fiction, as a way of emphasising the power of self-sufficient femininity; of rewilding the compromised woman.

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1. May Sinclair characterised Richardson’s fiction most famously as “just life going on and on. It is Miriam Henderson’s stream of consciousness going on and on.” May Sinclair, “The Novels of Dorothy Richardson,” *The Egoist* (April 1918): 58. For further discussion of Sinclair, Richardson and stream of consciousness see Bowler and Drewery, “One Hundred Years of the Stream of Consciousness: Editors’ Introduction,” 1-10. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Work is underway on the “Philosophy and Mysticism” first tranche of the Edinburgh Critical Editions of the Works of May Sinclair which will include scholarly editions of *A Defence of Idealism* (1917) ed. by Claire Drewery and Colin Tyler, and *The New Idealism* (1922) ed. by Rebecca Bowler and James Connelly. From philosophy we have new insights into Sinclair’s “unique” Idealism such as in Thomas, “The Idealism and Pantheism of May Sinclair,” and from literature and philosophy Jones, *Realism, Form and Representation in the Edwardian Novel*. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Sinclair, *The Three Brontës*, xi. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Sinclair, “Introduction.” In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, xv. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Sinclair, *The Three Brontës*, 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Sinclair, *The Three Brontës*, 199. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 25; *Undomesticated Ground*, 2; 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 210. Sinclair’s use of the word “pagan” to describe Emily, here and elsewhere in the biography, is by way of concurrence with Swinburne’s description of the “dark, unconscious instinct as of primitive nature-worship” he divines in her work, Ibid., 172. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. For this reading I am indebted to Regis, “’The Loose, Drifting Material of Life’: Experiments in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Life Writing”. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Wynne, “The ‘Charlotte’ Cult: Writing the Literary Pilgrimage from Gaskell to Woolf,” 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Sinclair, *The Three Brontës*, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Silvey, “May Sinclair and the Brontës: Virgin Priestesses of Art,” 165. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Sinclair, *The Three Brontës*, 224. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 3-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 276-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Silvey, “May Sinclair and the Brontës: Virgin Priestesses of Art,” 163. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 277. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Brontë, “Editor’s Preface to the New Edition of *Wuthering Heights*,” xxv-xxvi. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., xxv. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Sinclair, *The Three Brontës*, 278. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 278-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 90. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Sinclair, *The Three Brontës*, 194. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 199. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 192-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. McCarthy, *Green Modernism*, 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Sinclair, “Introduction,” xi. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., xiv-xv. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., ix. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 231. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Shorter, *The Brontës: Life and Letters*, vi. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Shorter, *Charlotte Brontë and her Circle*, 107-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Sinclair, *The Three Brontës*, 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid., 84-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., 95. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Shorter, *Charlotte Brontë and her Circle*, 96. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Shorter, *Charlotte Brontë and her Sisters*, 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Sinclair, *The Three Brontës*, 113. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., 114. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., xiii-xiv. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. I use the word “taint” here with reference to Sinclair’s repeated use of the word in *The Creators*. In that novel, the “literary taint” expresses the perceived vulgarity of lion-hunting London literary circles, precisely like those Charlotte Brontë found herself in at Thackeray’s party. See for example Sinclair, *The Creators: A Comedy*, 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Mathieson, “Brontë Countries: Nation, Gender and Place in the Literary Landscapes of Haworth and Brussels,” 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Sinclair had to revise her stance slightly with the publication of four letters from Charlotte to Monsieur Héger in *The Times*, July 29, 1913. She responds in the second edition of *The Three Brontës*, dated September 25, 1913, and then, to reach a wider audience, as “The New Brontë Letters,” published in *The Dial*, November 1, 1913. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Sinclair, *The Creators: A Comedy*, 313. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid., 381. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. The words I use here are drawn from Sinclair’s descriptions of Anne in her various critical works and are not my own appraisal of Anne’s work. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid., 205. Sinclair uses similar words to describe what she calls Anne’s “audacity”, which was, she says, “greater than Charlotte’s boldness or than Emily’s, because it was willed, it was deliberate, open-eyed; it had none of the superb unconsciousness of genius,” 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Silvey, “May Sinclair and the Brontës: Virgin Priestesses of Art,” 173. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Sinclair, *The Creators: A Comedy*, 118. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid., 288. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Ibid., 461. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid., 464. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid., 465-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Ibid., 466. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Ibid., 466. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Sinclair, *The Three Brontës*, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Sinclair, *The Creators: A Comedy*, 475. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Radford, “Introduction,” v. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Sinclair, *The Three Sisters*, 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Ibid., 307. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Ibid., 1-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Sinclair, *The Three Brontës*, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. I am grateful to Helen Clifford of Swaledale Museum in Reeth for this contextual information. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. BC. Shorter Correspondence, 16 Nov 1911-1 June 1923. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. Sinclair, *Mary Oliver: A Life*, 178. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Raitt, “Literary History as Exorcism: May Sinclair Meets the Brontës,” 197. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)