What problems did the Brontë family encounter?

As well as the difficulties of being a woman in the 19th Century, the Brontë family also faced many medical problems. Despite living in relative comfort, by 19th-century standards, in a rural parsonage in Haworth, Charlotte, Emily and Anne (as well as their less famous siblings) succumbed to some of the infectious diseases that characterised the Victorian age.

In 1825, whilst at Cowan Bridge School, Marie and Elizabeth died of tuberculosis: the damp conditions of the school were said to have played a role in their susceptibility to the illness. These two sisters were not the only Brontë siblings to die from this infectious disease. In September 1848, Branwell (Patrick's only son) also passed away aged 31. Although he also suffered from tuberculosis, he was a heavy drinker, which left him in poor health. Just four months later (December 1948) Emily died after catching a cold at Branwell's funeral. She also developed complications from tuberculosis, and was just 30 when she passed away. Anne, the youngest sibling, was 29 when she died less than a year after Emily. She, too, had tuberculosis and passed away during what was supposed to be a restorative trip to Scarborough in May 1849.

In 1848 Charlotte began to work on her second novel "Shirley" but suffered many tragedies whilst writing; she used writing as a way of coping with her grief. After the death of all her siblings, Charlotte remained at the parsonage, with her blind father, and in June 1854 she married her father's curate Arthur Bell Nichols. She became pregnant and died of complications along with her unborn baby in March 1855.

How typical were these problems in the 19th Century?

Although life expectancy was significantly lower in the first half of the 19th century than it is now, the family lived in a large and comfortable house, were affluent by local standards, and spent most of their time away from the poor sanitation and overcrowded slums of nearby cities such as Bradford. Yet for not one sibling from a large middle-class family to reach the age of 40 was unusual.

Brontë experts, however, have identified a possible cause of this high mortality rate: the family were living in a death trap. Haworth's drinking water, they believe, came from springs which were contaminated by rainwater that had soaked through the church graveyard - which was close to the parsonage where the Brontës lived. Long-term exposure to the bacterial infections this caused could have weakened the constitutions of the siblings and those of their neighbours, whose average lifespan was only around 26.

Charlotte also made reference to the poor diet she had experienced during her time at school in Cowan Bridge, suggesting the siblings may have suffered from malnutrition as children, which would have further weakened their health and development.

By the mid-1800s, tuberculosis had reached epidemic levels in Europe and the United States. The disease, now known to be infectious, attacks the lungs and damages other organs. Before the invention of antibiotics, its victims slowly wasted away, becoming pale and thin before finally dying of what was then known as consumption. The Victorians romanticized the disease and the effects it caused in the gradual build to death.

At the time, 'consumption' was not thought to be a disease which passed between those living in close proximity to one another. The Bronte sisters' deaths were portrayed as the result of melancholy and grief - that they literally just wasted away after the passing of the previous tragic family member. Now, of course, we know how easy it would have been for them to infect each other with the killer disease.