

**The Visual Representations of Literature as a British
(In)Formal Institution in *To Walk Invisible* (Director Sally
Wainwright, 2016, BBC Wales Production)**

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Abstract: The (In)Formal Institution of Literature in the British Visual Narrative “To Walk Invisible” includes a short theoretical approach on (in)formal literature, the distinction among the terms literature, literariness and literary person, what the terms British and Britishness refer to, and finally the way in which all these concepts are visually represented in Sally Wainwright’s movie.

Keywords: formal/informal institution, literature, visual storytelling, visual narrative, Britishness

The present paper focuses on how the British (in)formal institution of literature is pictured in the visual story *To Walk Invisible*. This story brings under the spotlight the three Brontë sisters, who wrote and published successful literature but under male names in Victorian England. Our short research is trying to analyse the ways in which literature, as an institution, is visually depicted in Sally Wainwright’s movie.

Institutions may be defined, according to Scott and Meyer, as “cultural rules giving collective meaning and value to particular entities and activities” (3), literature may be considered an institution for which the cultural rules are the genres and the literary forms the writers, men or women, use to convey meaning collectively and value in particular to certain communities, social groups of people specific to certain periods of time. In accordance with the ideas above, in *Impure Worlds - The Institution of Literature in the Age of the Novel*, J. Arac (2011), states that

“literature is a social institution” (9) as writers make “their choices of style, subject, genre and form” (ibid.) by drawing from and differing from “other writers of the past and of their own times” (ibid.), a statement which is opposed by the same author to “the purist view of great literature as an autonomous act of creation” (ibid.) Here, the rules of literature as a social institution are the style, the subject, the genre and the form the writers must comply with as they are connected to or different from both their past and contemporary writers. Another definition of literature as an institution describes it as “a public form of communication in which, at least in principle, the community at large is addressed” (Johansen, 292-293). What the three definitions have in common is the reference to the community, the public, the society, even if the first one does not necessarily envisage literature, it mentions cultural rules, culture including, generally speaking, literature, too. Consequently, we may understand and deduce at the same time that literature can be considered an institution, as it is part of a community like any other institutions, it also complies with specific rules in accordance with or specific to the writers' own times, and it is a means of communication of meanings and values between the writers on the one hand and the audience, the readers, on the other hand or other writers, from the past or contemporary.

Literature as an institution may not be seen as a formal one, in the same way as the other formal institutions are understood and perceived, that is buildings made of brick and mortar. Still, literature has used for many ages concrete means to be represented such as the writers' manuscripts, books which themselves may represent the informal institution of literature, as they are written according to certain rules belonging to different genres or forms, fiction, drama or poetry, and also before being published and made available to the large public to be read, reviewed, criticised or even put on stage. Therefore, taking this into consideration, literature may be considered a formal, that is

public or official, institution by means of libraries, publishing houses, literary critics, writers' associations, book clubs and other official representations. In the classical sense, that is not connected to an institution, literature represents, as the online dictionary from Cambridge defines it, “written artistic works, especially those with a high and lasting artistic value”, in prose or verse, “expressing ideas of permanent or universal interest” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary), and “stands related to man as science stands to nature”, as quoted in the same dictionary. What distinguishes a written text or work as being literary from other informal texts is literariness, a “sum of special linguistic and formal properties /.../ the observable ‘devices’ by which literary texts—especially poems—foreground their own language”. (Oxford Reference) When literary is related to literature it means “suitable for or in the style of literature”, but when referred to a person, literary means “having read a lot of literature”, explanations provided by the online Cambridge Dictionary. While the terms English and British have been considered interchangeable for some time, though the first one is included in the second one, still both refer to something or somebody from England or Great Britain. Britishness refers to the quality of being British. The location of almost the entire plot of the film “To Walk Invisible” is English, Yorkshire moors and meadows, the distant Haworth village, the native place for the Brontë family and where the father was a local vicar. What makes the (in)formal institution of literature, as represented in the visual story “To Walk Invisible”, British is the relevance of the novels written by the three sisters to the public in London, the capital of England and Great Britain, therefore to the entire British public and even for an audience beyond the British Isles. Britishness, in the same film, is represented by the quality of the three sisters' novels, mentioned in the visual narrative, of making the audience almost automatically think of Great Britain by means of: setting

(Yorkshire moors, London), clothes (British typical pattern), politeness and calmness (the father, the three sisters), language (characters' British accent).

In the visual narrative *To Walk Invisible*, the genres and the literary forms are the poems and novels written by the three Brontë sisters and brother, writings which have value and meaning for the readers in the Victorian London and Britain because the themes of the poems or the plots of the novels are opportunities for those readers who may find them interesting or may identify themselves with the characters. Visual representations of the four Brontë siblings' imagination are present even from the beginning of the film. Charlotte Brontë's character's voice reciting the first lines from her poem "We wove a web in childhood" accompanies the images of the four siblings as children running through the family house. They open a box with dolls and turn them into characters giving them names. These representations of imagination ever since childhood, characters and stories, may be considered visual representations of future possible writers, of literary people familiar from an early age with what implies the process of writing fiction: characters, story, imagination. The title of Charlotte's poem which is also the first line, "We wove a web in childhood" may allude to the process of writing the four siblings passed through since infancy, then childhood, youth and adulthood which she calls "riper age". "To Walk Invisible" includes a lot of sequences with visual representations of the three sisters, as adults, writing in their study and fewer visuals with their brother writing in his room, which may all be considered informal literature as their writings are not published, not accessible to the public, readers, literary critics and society. Just before the sisters' writings were published, thus becoming a part of the formalised world of literature, they chatted about their process of writing stories. They never used to talk about their writings even though the three sisters wrote a lot, thus

keeping their endeavours at an informal level. One of the reasons they did not talk about writing was that Charlotte recognized that a woman cannot live from writing literature, therefore she gave up the pen. On the contrary, Anne admits that literature is her life although the fact that she is not allowed to publish her writings turns her life occupation into a child's play. The Brontë sisters' brother, Branwell, also wrote poetry and was published before his sisters but never enjoyed their success, therefore, it may be said that his poems were formal literature. An informal literature instance with Branwell is pictured in the film during a memorable sequence which shows him watching his own manuscript of the poem *Real Rest*, informal literature, by the fireplace of a pub while the audience can listen to his voice reciting the first lines of the poem. If there is only one instance each for Charlotte's and Branwell's poems in the visual narrative, for Emily there are at least two.

One instance is the moment when Charlotte, after she found Emily's notes and read fragments from her sisters' poems: *The Prisoner* and *High waving heather*, tried to convince Emily to publish them. But the last one totally rejected the idea of her writings becoming formal literature. Emily feared once her poems were available to the large public they might not be received well but instead be criticised. Emily's poems have a huge impact on her sister Charlotte who finds herself crying, impressed by the lines written by her sister. Charlotte states that Emily's poems are "extraordinary", "not something to be hidden" and that "no woman, no one, has ever written poetry like this", also "exceptional", "astonishing", she couldn't even breath while reading them, which may be considered informal criticism or peer review, before the poems are published and become formal literature. The second instance with Emily's poems and another peer review moment is the one when she recites loudly to Anne, while they both contemplate the Yorkshire meadows, the whole

poem *No Coward Soul Is Mine*. In fact, Emily does this to encourage Anne who blames herself for not helping their brother more while working as a governess in Halifax where he was working, too. The three sisters' books on the shelves from the study where they used to write: Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* (three volumes), Emily's *Wuthering Heights* printed together with Anne's *Agnes Grey* (three volumes) are proofs of their novels being published, thus becoming formal literature, printed in paper cover for the public to read them, but at the same time they may be considered visual representations of informal literature because it is a personal library, Brontë family's personal and private library. The volumes written by the Brontë siblings may lead us to another distinction between formal literature, represented by male names as authors, Currer Bell, Ellis Bell and Acton Bell, in order for the three novels to be published, and informal literature, represented by the actual authors of the three novels, Charlotte Brontë for "*Jane Eyre*", Emily Brontë for *Wuthering Heights* and Anne Brontë for *Agnes Grey*, who are female and not allowed officially to publish according to the contemporary Victorian rules. The confusion made by the publishers who mistook the author of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as being Charlotte Brontë and not Anne Brontë led to another visual of formal literature that is the publishing house in London represented by Mr Smith and Mr Williams as publishers, according to the visual narrative "To Walk Invisible". This confusion created the opportunity for the Brontë sisters to reveal their real identity and we may say that informal literature represented by woman writers became formal literature once the two sisters, Charlotte and Anne, faced their publishers, who, not surprisingly, taking into account the huge success *Jane Eyre* enjoyed, became almost speechless when meeting the two female authors. The two publishers, Mr Smith and Mr Williams bring forward another instance of formal literature visual, the London literary society by naming

Thackeray, another contemporary and famous writer, of whom they say would certainly wish to meet the Brontë sisters, especially Charlotte, the author of *Jane Eyre*, the successful novel which was exhibited in the publishing house hall for everybody to read.

As opposed to the formal visual or material representations of literature represented by the books, the three novels published, printed lines or texts, are the three sisters' manuscripts and notebooks with their poems and novels, handwritten lines or texts, which can be seen along the entire film and may also be considered visuals but of informal literature. The peer review among the three sisters may be seen as part of informal literature as opposed to the critics' reviews published in different local newspapers as part of formal literature. The first visual of peer review among the sisters is in fact a silent one, as Charlotte, curious about Emily's poems, looks for them and reads them without her sister's consent. Emily, who wishes to keep them for herself for that moment, after finding out about her sister's intrusion in her private writings, refers to Charlotte's act as being part of her "grabby little publishing plans" of which she does not wish to be part. In opposition to Emily's rejection to publishing her poems is Anne's desire to know Charlotte's opinion about her own poems, if she considers them worth publishing. Charlotte finds Anne's poems as "not without charm", "competent" and her novel as being "beautifully written". There is also self-criticism in the visual narrative when Anne states that her novel is not "Gondal and Geraldine", that it is not about princes and princesses, but "more about how things are in the real world", about her "being a governess", about what she has "seen or heard, witnessed". While Emily thinks that by publishing her poems she would be "pored over and rubbished and ridiculed by anyone who might choose to waste their money on it", Anne is "ready to try and publish", "ready to risk failure". Therefore, the step the three

sisters must take in order to turn their informal writings, their manuscripts, into formal writings, that is books with poems and novels, is a difficult one. Charlotte, being the eldest sister and the one who is supposed to know better than the other ones, is convinced that her sister Emily's poems, her "contribution could elevate a small volume into something actually worth spending a few shillings on". The critics' reviews published in different local newspapers as part of formal literature are visualized several times during the film and as Charlotte, the eldest sister, is the one who keeps in touch with the publishers, she is the one who receives the first two official critics reviews via the traditional post, "one from The Critic and one from The Athenaeum, both anonymous, but both really good", especially about Emily's poetry as predicted by Charlotte: "refreshing, vigorous poetry, no sickly affectations, no namby-pamby, no tedious imitations of familiar strains". It is paradoxical, as Emily was the one totally against publishing, yet she is the one whose poems receive the best reviews, thus turning their sisters' unofficial writings, informal literature, into official ones, that is formal literature. If Charlotte took the initiative of publishing their poems, the moment their brother causes another painful scene for their family because of his own problems, Emily is the one who initiates her sisters in publishing their novels encouraged by the success their poems met with the literary public in London, which is another huge step in formalising the three sisters' writings. The Brontë brother, Branwell, in a discussion with his sister Charlotte, points very well the difference between publishing poems and publishing fiction at the time all the siblings were writing, the Victorian period, by stating that they could not earn money by writing poetry but by writing novels. The financial issue was not the only difference spotted by the two Brontë siblings, between the two forms of literature, but also what a writer's abilities must be in order to produce literature worth publishing, and that is to use the intellect to its full capacity for

composing a poem according to Branwell and “a good story” for a novel according to Charlotte. This discussion between Charlotte and Branwell is the first real confrontation between the Brontë siblings concerning their abilities of writing and their prospects of becoming famous writers and making money out of it.

A very important moment in the life of the literary Brontë family, the four still alive siblings writing and publishing poems and novels, is when in order to help their father and make him realise he is not alone in fighting for the wellbeing of the family, the three sisters, at Emily's initiative, let him know about their writings and published novels. They reveal their success to their father but at the same time try to protect their brother by not letting their father share with him the secret of the three sisters publishing successfully under male names. Their brother failed both in his attempts to become a successful writer and in his struggle to live a normal life without causing trouble to the whole family, partly because of his inability to make his poems worth buying and therefore turning them into famous literature. At present, the house the Brontë family lived in is a museum, Brontë Parsonage Museum, created and supported by a writers' association. In the end of the film, the audience travels by the film camera from the outside, the stone street, to the inside of the Bronte Family house, through the visitors captivated by the house in general and the books in particular. At the same time, the producer inserted information about what happened to the Bronte sisters after their brother's death: Emily and Anne get sick and die several months later, while Charlotte continues to publish two more novels and is “*hugely celebrated in her own lifetime*”. Still, as the producer finally concludes, the texts produced by the three Bronte sisters, their novels and poetry, especially the poems written by Emily, are still considered to be part of the best literature that has ever been written in English.

Sally Wainwright, the screenwriter and television producer of the visual narrative "To Walk Invisible" renders in pictures the dramatic life of the Bronte family, in an English countryside setting, the Yorkshire moors, the village of Haworth, for the British National television, BBC Wales, with glimpses from a surreal past and the help of special effects, rings of fires above the sisters' and brother's heads, the audience being able to depict literature not only as an informal institution, at least not as a brick and mortar building, but also as a formal one in which the Bronte sisters must conform to the rules of the Victorian Age, female writers under male males, walking invisible.

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Film resource

To Walk Invisible; The Bronte Sisters. (2016) Director Sally Wainwright. Perf(ormer)s. Jonathan Pryce, Finn Atkins, Chloe Pirrie, Charlie Murphy and Adam Nagaitis. BBC Wales production.