

MIZZOU

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Around the Columns

Mysterious manuscript

MU Libraries Special Collections is one of the few owners of an original Charlotte Brontë manuscript.

A humidity- and temperature-controlled vault in Ellis Library protects the minor masterpiece. Brontë wrote *The Secret* and *Lily Hart*, a set of two novels, in 1833 when she was 17.

Brontë's youthful manuscripts are important because they offer clues about the characters and stories of her adult writing. *The Secret*, a dramatic story with dark, twisted plots, reflects the Gothic style of her literary masterpiece, *Jane Eyre*.

MU English Professor Emeritus William Holtz, in his *Two Tales by Charlotte Brontë*, wrote of how Douro, the handsome hero of *The Secret*, re-emerged as Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. In *Lily Hart*, Holtz found Brontë's long preparation that produced *Jane Eyre*.

Readers need a powerful magnifying glass to read Brontë's manuscript, written on paper the color of today's grocery bags. Each of the 16 pages measures 3 inches wide by 4½ inches long.

Why Brontë wrote so small remains a mystery. Researchers speculate she was hiding her writing from a stern religious aunt who raised the Brontë children after their mother's death.

MU received the miniature manuscript as a gift from Sen. Stuart Symington and his son,






This original manuscript by Charlotte Brontë, written during the author's adolescence, is held in the MU Libraries Special Collections. Reading the young Brontë's handwriting requires a magnifying glass. Photo by Shane Epping

Congressman James Symington. The younger Symington found it among his mother's possessions after her death.

"The manuscript we have was thought lost in World War II. Mrs. Symington had purchased it in a book shop in Britain when they were there," says Michael Holland, director of MU Special Collections, Archives and Rare Books.

When MU acquired the manuscript in 1975, it was loosely sewn together. Conservationists separated the pages and encapsulated each in Mylar. Visitors may handle the plastic-enclosed manuscript but must present a photo ID and sit under a security camera.

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