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Charlotte Brontë: Her development  
as a writer and common features of  
her novels

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## INTRODUCTION

It has been more than one hundred and fifty years since the first novel of then 31 years old Charlotte Brontë was first published. The novel's title was *Jane Eyre* and with this book came the beginning of Charlotte's professional career as a novelist whose name is still not to be forgotten even though she used a pen name for her first publications. Even now her novels keep attracting readers from all over the world, new film adaptations of her work are being created and her stories are also penetrating other genres of art like musicals, operas and more.

However, it is not only Charlotte Brontë's literary work what has been provoking curiosity and attracted interest. Her life and the lives of her family, especially her sisters also known as influential female writers, are for many people almost equally exciting. This fact may be supported by the numbers of biographies and documents which are continually being produced and which keep drawing interest of large audiences. This January – in 2017, Britain's TV Channel BBC One aired a brand new two-hour long TV film dedicated to the lives of Brontë siblings which proves that people are still hungry for more material on this famous literary family. It also suggests that it is much more difficult than with other writers to separate Brontës' works from their life experience although the lives of all siblings were only short ones. Despite the fact all three Brontë sisters died before they reached the age of 40, much has happened in their lifetimes and their life stories were (and still are) romanticized by many, contributing to creating a Brontë myth as suggested by author Lucasta Miller in her book bearing the title of the same name.

This "myth-making" was started together with the publication of Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. Afterwards, all the Brontë sisters and Charlotte especially were never fully perceived by public only as influential authors of timeless novels picking brave themes for their times such as the role of women in society or the clash of morality and desires but also as tragic heroines of their own, their lives being pictured in a novel-like manner explaining and justifying their work. However, although it is undeniable that their home near the moors and all the tragedies that happened to them must have been an inspiration for their work, the sole influence for them was not only misery and depression, on the contrary, the main themes we may observe in their

finest works are rather fierce, bold and passionate which was a very unconventional and among many not exactly welcomed occurrence in Victorian England they lived in, suggesting the sisters were not merely victims of their tragic lives but also strong and intelligent women. However, women were not supposed to be passionate and brave back then, they were not expected to have desires for equality and adventure, and therefore the novels of the Brontë sisters were accepted with a lot of confusion and mistrust from both men and women – for men this was a threat to their status in society and for women a threat they would be perceived as immoral and undeserving. Elizabeth Gaskell, who wished to maintain her position as both a respectable female writer and as an obedient wife and mother knowing her position in Victorian society, tried her best to redirect the attention from the novels of Anne, Emily and Charlotte to their lives which were also a great basis for writing a novel-like biography of the last surviving sister. Today, we must admit she had a lot of success with this mission and she did create a surviving Brontë myth.

Nevertheless, in time, the literary works of all sisters gained attention and critical appreciation they deserved and Brontë sisters are nowadays established as respectable female writers who provided the literary world with timeless and influential pieces of art. Even so, up to this date, readers keep wondering how three women living basically in seclusion somewhere in Yorkshire without much contact with other people, could create such passionate and vivid characters (especially male characters are a source of much confusion) and describe all these deep, sophisticated relationships. On one hand, Brontë sisters were not as secluded from society as some biographies may suggest as their family had some connections and acquaintances and Haworth was not just a small village but growing industrial town. Moreover, Charlotte and Emily had spent some time abroad in Brussels where they undoubtedly had a chance to meet many interesting people. Nevertheless, as all three sisters were spinsters when they wrote their works, it is still puzzling how emotionally and realistically they portrayed all the complicated love stories. This ability may only be attributed to keen observation of their surroundings and to having the opportunity and permission (from their father) to read extensively basically anything they could which they combined with their own great literary talents and imagination that may have been enhanced by the poetic view on the moors laying just behind their windows.

In this thesis, I would like to put the work of one of the Brontë sisters carefully in context with her life experience and historical background and thus concentrate on

what influenced her and how she developed as a writer with respect to how she grew and matured as a person and how her ideas and opinions changed during her life which she reflected in her books. As already suggested above, I have chosen the oldest sister who has gained most popularity and recognition not only during her lifetime but also afterwards – Charlotte.

The thesis is divided into two parts – in the first one, the attention is paid to the broader historical context and consequently to Brontë’s biography. The focus in this part is laid on Brontë’s upbringing, family, education and working experience as all these elements had impact and shaped Brontë as a writer who produced writings since her early childhood and who later published four complete novels.

These novels are further analysed in the second, more analytical part of the thesis. For the full view of Brontë’s professional development, all four novels are analysed in the following order: *The Professor*, *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley* and *Villette* in this order – i.e. in order these were written and not by the date of their publishing so that the analysis of the literary development and changes of narrative style and features is logical. Along with commenting on the changes, I will also concentrate on the common elements and similarities between all four novels to define Charlotte Brontë’s personal writing style and recurrent themes which often reflected on the changing historical and personal background.

By using these approaches, combining biographical study and literary analysis, I am hoping to create a thesis providing a complex overview of Brontë’s work as I believe, and per her words Charlotte did too, the authors of literary works draw their inspiration mainly in their souls, surroundings, and experience, and it is impossible to separate the writer from his or her work, but it is also important to observe the lines and bear in mind that novel is not autobiography. As stated by Tom Winnifrith and Edward Chitham in their Macmillan literary lives edition *Charlotte and Emily Brontë*: “Similarities have been found between some characters in the Brontës’ lives and some characters in their works, but similarity is not identity, nor can, or should, we find real life models for all Brontë characters.”<sup>1</sup>

In conclusion, I would like to provide the results of individual analyses merged into one commenting on the overall development of Brontë’s work.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Winnifrith and Edward Chitham: *Charlotte and Emily Brontë: literary lives* (London u.a.: Macmillan, 1989), 1.

# 1. Historical context

## 1.1. From Romanticism to Victorian Era and back

Charlotte Brontë was born in 1816 as a third child of Irish Anglican clergyman of poor background, Patrick Brontë, and his Cornish wife Maria Brontë born Maria Branwell. Charlotte was born into the turbulent era of revolutions, scientific discoveries and changes in society but also into times of fixed and stern values, conventions, manners and morals of a long period of Queen Victoria's reign known as the Victorian era. This era started in the 1830's – the beginning is sometimes connected with 1832, i.e. the year of the First Reform Bill, but more often with 1837 when Victoria became queen in June and gave the whole epoch its name.<sup>2</sup> At the same time however, Brontë was also born in times of Romanticism when famous poets and novelists such as Byron, Keats, or Scott were still producing their works that greatly influenced Victorian literature and Brontë herself. Scottish novelist and historical writer Margaret Oliphant describes the change from Romantic to Victorian era in literature as “a period of transition, in which many great names were falling into silence, and the men who were destined to take their places were but slowly pushing to the front.”<sup>3</sup> Among these “men” was also a great many deal of women, Charlotte Brontë included, however, her name is not mentioned in Mrs. Oliphant's *Victorian Age of English literature*.

From her Romantic inheritance Brontë derived her perception of writer's self as material for mythology. The early Victorian period when Charlotte started writing her famous novels is sometimes also described as the direct continuation to the age of Romanticism whereas some of the Romantic attributes were absorbed and some rejected.<sup>4</sup> In fact, by reading Charlotte Brontë's novels, we may recognize she was much more inspired by the Romantic cult of the individual, focusing her work rather on the exploration of human psychology, inner struggle, emotions, importance of childhood and nature than on political issues of her time we may trace in works of other Victorian writers.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Daniel Altick: *Victorian people and ideas* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1974), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Oliphant and Francis Oliphant. *The Victorian age of English literature: in two volumes* (London: Percival, 1892), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> See Pauline Nestor: *Charlotte Brontë* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1987), 27.

The works of all Brontë sisters were less related to works of their Victorian contemporaries than to the Romantic authors of the beginning of the century, i.e. works of Scott, Wordsworth or Byron.<sup>6</sup> These Romantic authors had, indeed, many revolutionary ideas, however, they approached them not outwardly but rather turned into their own individualities where they were looking for answers for much more global issues.<sup>7</sup> Brontë, in a similar manner, dealt with the issues and fixed values in Victorian society in much subtler manner than Charles Dickens, George Eliot or Rudyard Kipling. In fact, her only novel where she turned more explicitly to comment on politics is in *Shirley* which is set in the times of the luddite movement. Even in *Shirley*, however, her primary focus is on something much more personal as she dives deep into the mind of her heroine Caroline Helstone who is suffering for not having any meaningful employment of her own and is feeling useless and inferior due to her idleness.

However, it would be incorrect to say Charlotte did not comment on other contemporary issues of the society at all. She touches upon the topics of religion as she addresses the hypocrisy of some of the clergy and formal religiosity; she also focuses on education, but especially on social injustices suffered by women. The point is, her primary intention is not to analyse these issues as such – she rather shows how these problems of the society directly impact the lives of her characters, and here we get back to the fact Brontë chose to deal with these issues in a more private manner, focusing on how these problems affect human psychology and behaviour.<sup>8</sup> As a result, Kenneth King states that the Brontë sisters in fact transformed Romanticism as they extended its typical features by adding Gothic and supernatural elements which basically opened doors to “modern novel with deft existential strokes - a movement away from religion to the secular with progressive feminist strains, and a socially prescient sensibility”<sup>9</sup>.

## 1.2. More about Victorian Era – morals and values

Although Charlotte’s work is more inclined to Romantic times, it was Victorian Era

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<sup>6</sup> Alan Horsman: *The Victorian novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 159.

<sup>7</sup> Gilbert Keith Chesterton: *The Victorian age in literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Mike Edwards: *Charlotte Brontë: The novels* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1999), 206-207.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth King: “Obsession - Beginning with the Brontës: A Revisitation” *Antioch Review* (2015): 73(2), pp. 225-241, accessed April 17, 2017, ISSN 00035769.

during which she wrote and published her novels and, most importantly, it was Victorian audience who was to read and judge Brontë's books, and it based their critique on the strict moral values and beliefs typical for Victorian times. Therefore, to understand this criticism and attitudes towards literature, it is convenient to look at this part of English history in greater detail.

Victorian Era is usually connected with manners and morals. Victorian society was particularly concerned with the so called "small morals" such as table manners, conversation or dressing conventions which were perceived as symbols of civilized social life and which made Victorian society so moralistic.<sup>10</sup> The beginning of this Victorian prudery may be related to the fact that people from middle class decided to use their new wealth to make themselves a part of aristocracy.<sup>11</sup> Due to this, middle-class values became even more prominent in Victorian Era and even became known as "Victorian values" – these, beside familiar values such as cleanliness, temperance, honesty or work, also included others often connected to work ethic, i.e. promptness, regularity, conformity or rationality.<sup>12</sup> Observing these values created a "good character" in a person and having such a good character was perceived as an absolute requirement for those entering both employment and marriage – the goals of "getting on" in the world (this phrase was established in 1840s and it means making a success of one's life, having a career, finding a place in society) and/or getting married are in the centre of the novels of all three Brontë sisters who pointed out how these two approaches affect one's personality, private feelings and public image.<sup>13</sup>

Cultivating of male characters (the discourse was set distinctly for men) was of utmost importance to Victorian thinking which may be supported by the fact that books focusing on this topic were produced and consumed extensively; Heather Glen argues that Charlotte Brontë herself explored this 'getting on' in novels *The Professor* and *Shirley* where the two male characters – Crimsworth and Robert Moore strive to 'get on' in their lives and to build their characters.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb: *The de-moralization of society: from Victorian virtues to modern values* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 22.

<sup>11</sup> Chesterton, *The Victorian age in literature*, 21.

<sup>12</sup> Himmelfarb, Gertrude. *The de-moralization of society: from Victorian virtues to modern values* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 29.

<sup>13</sup> Heather Glen: *The Cambridge companion to the Brontës* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 148.

<sup>14</sup> Glen, *The Cambridge companion to the Brontës*, 151.

Victorian literature, which is recognized today, is often based on the criticism of the era and its values and very often reacted against it – this tradition was started by the Oxford Movement followed by a man who is nowadays seen as one of the most prominent writers in history – Charles Dickens, after whom came a new wave of romantic Protestantism represented by writers such as Carlyle, Ruskin or Tennyson.<sup>15</sup>

However, the protest in the work of novelist and poets was not the only one which shook the Victorian society. Victorian moral principles of and their religious basis were also beginning to be questioned especially after the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859. Nevertheless, morality then for many Victorians became a replacement for the loss of religious strengthening the power of morality even more.<sup>16</sup> Though Charlotte Brontë published all her novels before Darwin's study came out and she never really lost her faith and stayed religious until the end of her life, it did not prevent her from discussing the issues of religion and how it is often connected with morals and conventionalities, which she often rejected.

Moreover, as education became more available and the printing press was spreading and thus causing the books to be much cheaper and accessible, Victorian era is also known as the great age of English novel as novels were best suited for portrayal of life and society – i.e. something readers can relate to.<sup>17</sup> To tell her stories, Charlotte Brontë also chose the form of a novel and in total produced four complete books.

### **1.2.1. Being a female in Victorian England**

As Charlotte gives a lot of attention to gender issues in her novels, it is convenient to take a better look at the life of female in Victorian times. Upper and middle class women were usually set apart from the commercial and intellectual world and the prosperity among tradesman was often accompanied by a separation of business from home, which absolutely detached women from the money-making world and responsibility leaving them with basically nothing left to do to occupy themselves – this concept of so called refinement basically prescribed that all women outside the working

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<sup>15</sup> Chesterton, *The Victorian age in literature*, 26-27.

<sup>16</sup> Himmelfarb, *The de-moralization of society – From Victorian virtues to modern values*. 26-27.

<sup>17</sup> Renhuma Bint Anis, "The Woman question in the novels by the Brontë sisters," *IIUC Studies*. Vol. – 3. *Bangladesh Journals Online*, December 2006, pp. 19-30, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://www.banglajol.info/index.php/IIUCS/article/download/2629/2244>.

class should not be looking for any employment except in cases of extreme necessity.<sup>18</sup> The only acceptable options for middle-class women in Victorian times were actually either marriage, dependence on the family patriarch or becoming a governess.<sup>19</sup> The latter became the occupation of Charlotte Brontë and despite her hating this occupation, it also gave her lot of inspiration for her work.

Female frame of mind and role in society in general was something of significant interest to Charlotte Brontë, as she herself was a woman wanting to break through the limitations of her era. In this manner, Charlotte started a revolution of her own, by raising literary topics never used before in such extent, and which in her times were not entirely understood or accepted. In Victorian era, women were supposed to preside over the private, domestic spheres, whereas the public sphere belonged to men, even though through most of the nineteenth century it was a woman who sat on the English throne.<sup>20</sup> The queen herself was, however, not supportive of women's emancipation and even called women's suffrage movement, which began as early as 1840, a 'mad folly' condemning women to remain in the position of second class citizens.<sup>21</sup>

Charlotte Brontë did not comment on the slavery and oppression in British colonies (though we can find implicit allusions in *Jane Eyre* in the character of Bertha Mason, a savage Creole woman from Jamaica) all over the world as she finds slaves in women in her own country. She even called her employment as a governess a slavery.<sup>22</sup> Brontë explored this issue with great intensity through her characters who are dealing with anger, desire, violence and repression, and for this reason her novels were often considered not female enough, coarse and vulgar.<sup>23</sup>

However, only after it was revealed the author with androgynous pen name was, in reality, a woman – when Brontë published as Currer Bell, the criticism was not as much prominent. Some of the readers then even felt uncomfortable that a woman wrote love stories from the female point of view and she even let her female heroines explicitly express their passions, which was something utterly new.<sup>24</sup> Charlotte went as

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<sup>18</sup> Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas*, 51.

<sup>19</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Patrick Brantlinger: *Victorian literature and postcolonial studies* (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 63.

<sup>21</sup> Anis, "The Woman question in the novels by the Brontë sisters," 22.

<sup>22</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Glen, *The Cambridge companion to the Brontës*, 175.

<sup>24</sup> Lucasta Miller: *The Brontë Myth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), 155.

far as exploring a sexual identity of women. She was brave enough to advocate in the prudish Victorian England that women have sexual desires and there is nothing wrong about the fact they also expect their desires to be fulfilled.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, just like Charlotte in her real life, her heroines also have their ambitions in life and as Nesta Devine points out, the negative response Charlotte received from the Victorian audience was a consequence of her daring to “portray a woman as not dedicated to her virtue, and as intelligently weighing up her life chances (which) was inimical to Victorian standards of womanliness”<sup>26</sup>.

What was common for the era, however, was the Victorian obsession with the state of one’s soul – and Brontë likewise stayed true to her religious beliefs throughout her life, which is documented especially in her correspondence with her deeply religious friend Ellen Nussey. Despite her beliefs, Charlotte was still able to question her fate and beliefs and she reflected it in her novels. As Emily Griesinger points out, it was particularly challenging for Brontë to stay true to her beliefs in a patriarchal society which was against women expressing themselves in the form of literature when she believed God had given her the talent to become a writer.<sup>27</sup> Brontë, however, believed that as a writer, she should be honest and stay true to her heart. And in consequence, she was criticised for these virtues on the basis of Victorian strict values.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 34.

<sup>26</sup> Nesta Devine, “Spectral Strangers: Charlotte Brontë’s teachers,” *Educational Philosophy* 45(4) (2013): 383-395, accessed April 18, 2017, DOI: 10.1080/00131857.2012.718145.

<sup>27</sup> Emily Griesinger, “Charlotte Brontë’s religion: faith, feminism, and Jane Eyre,” *Christianity and Literature* 58(1) (2008): 29-59, accessed April 15, 2017, ISSN 01483331.

<sup>28</sup> Edwards, *Charlotte Brontë: The novels*, 210.

## 2. Haworth

The work of Charlotte Brontë and her sisters is often connected to the place of their home in Haworth in Yorkshire, which is believed to be of a great inspiration to all three sisters. Although the Haworth village and Brontë's parsonage have been wildly romanticized over the time, there is no doubt that Brontë sisters had a deep connection with the place which is evident especially in Emily's *Wuthering Heights* where the moors play significant role in the story. Charlotte Brontë used the moors most evidently in *Jane Eyre* as a symbol of infinite loneliness and wild despair. Haworth, however, was not just moors - it also offered a cultural life for its citizens and thus also had its role in the development of Brontës' writing.

The Brontës first arrived at Haworth in 1820 when Charlotte was 4 years old and already at this time the town of 4668 inhabitants contained about thirteen working mills expanding over time as the town became more and more industrial.<sup>29</sup> And like most other industrial towns, Haworth also had its philanthropic and educational societies and various public lectures took place there as well as in the nearby Halifax where it was also possible to attend different cultural events.<sup>30</sup> However, Elizabeth Gaskell portrayed Haworth as much gloomier and dark place as she focused on describing the "graveyard (which) rises above the church, and is terribly full of upright tombstone"<sup>31</sup> and she carefully chose suggestive adjectives such as 'wild', 'bleak', 'lonely' or 'isolated' for the description of the place to make it seem more remote and personal at the same time.<sup>32</sup> This awoken the typical view of Brontë sisters as three lonely women living in the middle of nowhere having nothing but their wild imagination.

In fact, Haworth offered valuable cultural life especially with regards to music as the place of one of the oldest philharmonic society in the country which held regular concerts in the town despite the fact there was no train connection at that time.<sup>33</sup> This also somehow contradicts Gaskell's depiction of local people as savage, harsh, rough and unemotional which she attributed to their Norse ancestry.<sup>34</sup> In truth, among the

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<sup>29</sup> Glen, *The Cambridge Companion to Brontës*, 16.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell: *The life and works of Charlotte Brontë and her sisters* (London: Smith, Elder, 1909), 5.

<sup>32</sup> Glen, *The Cambridge companion to Brontës*, 14.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>34</sup> Gaskell, *The life and works of Charlotte Brontë and her sisters*, 12.

inhabitants of Haworth, there were also many professional people and tradesmen - these included a surgeon, a watchmaker, several grocers, a teacher etc., and many of these people were also acquaintances of the Brontës.<sup>35</sup> However, as clergy, Brontës were considered a gentry and therefore, there was only little opportunity in Haworth to get in touch with ordinary people as well as little opportunity to mix with other members of the gentry.<sup>36</sup>

The Haworth parsonage to which the Brontë family and their two maidservants moved in 1820 was built in 1779, located on the outskirts of the town at the top of the hill – it was enclosed by churchyard and beyond the house were the famous moors.<sup>37</sup> This was the environment in which the Brontë family was living and in which the works of all three famous sisters were created – not just a bleak place surrounded by windy moors but also a growing industrial town full of people of different kinds and where living a cultural life was not as impossible as it may seem.

It is, however, of no great wonder Charlotte and her sisters turned to the wild nature for their romantic inspiration and gave it more space in their works, rather than to a common and uninspiring town. For the sisters, the moors presented a symbol of independence and liberty, and their connection to the wild nature of the moors had, without any doubt, a significant influence on their literary works.

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<sup>35</sup> Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, 41.

<sup>36</sup> Winnifrith and Chitham, *Charlotte and Emily Brontë: literary lives*, 115.

<sup>37</sup> Glen, *The Cambridge companion to Brontës*, 27.

### 3. The Life of Charlotte Brontë and her family

In this chapter, I would like to focus on Charlotte's family background focusing mainly on the first impulses for her to start writing, coming from her father Patrick, and to provide an insight to her relationship with her siblings which, in my view, was a very important element for her works – both because the siblings worked together on their writings since early childhood, and for the impact of their deaths on Charlotte. Therefore, I will put emphasis on the influence Charlotte's father and siblings had on her work throughout their lives.

As their mother Maria became ill shortly after the family arrived at Haworth and her health was deteriorating quickly, and while the children's father was busy with the duties of his new parish, the Brontë children were enjoying their freedom while exploring their new homeland and discovering all the beauties of its nature they later so masterfully depicted in their novels.<sup>38</sup> They were thus allowed to nurture their fantasy and imagination and to appreciate the feeling of being free and in a way also independent – i.e. elements of utmost importance in their novels.

Mrs. Brontë died of cancer in September 1821, one year after the family moved from Hartshead to Haworth and after she gave birth to six children. Afterwards, as Patrick Brontë failed in his attempts to secure a new mother for his children, it was mainly their mother's sister Elizabeth who came from Penzance to Haworth to look after all the children, and she stayed until her death in 1842. Elizabeth's character is often described as severe and unmotherly and as she was a strict Calvinist, she is also blamed for Branwell's and Anne's 'fear of damnation', and of Charlotte's 'tinged' view of the world as well.<sup>39</sup> Despite this fact, Elizabeth became a capable ruler of the house and she taught her nieces sewing, housekeeping and, most importantly, supported the independence of their minds although she never interfered with their teaching since this was the area of their father, Mr. Patrick Brontë.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 3.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Augustine Birrell: *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (London: Walter Scott, LTD., 1887), 32.

### 3.1. Father's influence – Patrick Brontë

Charlotte Brontë's family and their life in Haworth Parsonage gained (and still does) almost as much interest as her works. This interest was sparked mainly by the biography written by another famous novelist Elizabeth Gaskell shortly after Charlotte's death and which was first published in 1857. In this biography, Gaskell portrays Reverend Patrick Brontë, the father of Charlotte, as a man, who "wished to make his children hardy, and indifferent to the pleasures of eating and dress"<sup>41</sup>, she pictured him as a severe, ill-tempered man who disliked any vanities of life, a stern ruffian. However, it was later revealed that the real Patrick Brontë was much different from the man described by Elizabeth Gaskell. In fact, most of the unfavourable things said about his person were provided to Gaskell by a dismissed servant and it later showed up the stories of burnt shoes or dresses destroyed by Mr. Brontë in his 'gusts of passion' were mere myths.<sup>42</sup> Gaskell used this portrayal of Patrick Brontë to explain what was in her times perceived as unfeminine in the Brontës' novels and the ideas these books contained as she "justifies" this by lack of normal upbringing in 'loveless environment'.<sup>43</sup> Brontës other servants – Nancy Garrs and later Martha Brown who lived with her master until his death both spoke of Mr. Brontë using nothing but positive words praising their master's kindness and generosity.<sup>44</sup>

Be as it may, this picture of Patrick Brontë provided by Gaskell was unfortunately readily adopted by many other biographers of Charlotte – for instance, writer and journalist of 19<sup>th</sup> century Davenport Adams in his publication *Celebrated Englishwomen of Victorian Era* who, after stating the mother of the family died happily as she was 'released from an unhappy life caused by her husband's harshness and inflexibility', describes Charlotte's father as follows: "[He] bestowed but scant attention upon them; he did not understand children, and he lived in an atmosphere of morose reserve. [...] So the children grew up in silence and solitude – and without that vigilant loving care which their inherited delicacy of constitution demanded"<sup>45</sup> This statement is

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<sup>41</sup> Gaskell, *The Life and works of Charlotte Brontë and her sisters*, 51.

<sup>42</sup> Clement Shorter: *Charlotte Brontë and her circle* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1896), 27.

<sup>43</sup> Glen, *The Cambridge companion to Brontës*, 26.

<sup>44</sup> Shorter, *Charlotte Brontë and her circle*, 52

<sup>45</sup> Davenport W. H. Adams: *Celebrated Englishwomen of the Victorian era* (London: F.V. White, 1884), 89.

basically falsified only few lines below, where Adams says Patrick Brontë was clever enough to see that his children were intelligent and original when discussing politics with him, which made him proud and very much fond of them.<sup>46</sup> When his daughters became famous writers, he was so happy for their success and achievements, he even cut out any newspaper article for safekeeping.<sup>47</sup> It is important to note that Patrick Brontë was a busy parson and based on various sources also quite an introvert thoughtful person – he may not have been of the best and most attentive fathers but he also gave his children space and opportunity to grow their imagination and use it in their writing. For this, he played an important role for Charlotte Brontë’s development as a writer.

It is true that it was Patrick Brontë who incited the eagerness to write in his children when, in 1826, he brought them toy soldiers and dolls which became the inspiration for Branwell, Charlotte, Emily and Anne’s earliest juvenile writings. The children named each soldier after a famous public figure of their times – Charlotte for instance chose the Duke of Wellington and her brother Branwell Napoleon Bonaparte and they soon started producing tiny, microscopic writings and plays about these characters creating their own imaginary world called Angria, whereas Emily and Anne named theirs Gondal.<sup>48</sup> The inclination of the Brontë children towards writing was also supported by the fact their father was a subscriber of newspapers they had access to and they used a lot of information gained from this source in their writings, especially those regarding politics as their father encouraged their discussions about political and religious issues of the day.<sup>49</sup>

Another source of inspiration for the children was Mr. Brontë himself – he was born in Ireland and throughout his life he never forgot his ancestry and through stories and writings of his own he passed these to his children who were encouraged to write stories he told them the previous day.<sup>50</sup> In her young age, Charlotte even wrote a short story inspired by her father’s talks of his native land called “An Adventure in Ireland”. Patrick Brontë was a published author himself as he wrote a pamphlet, stories and poems. Among these are collections of poems *Cottage Poems* (published in 1811), *The Rural Ministry* (published in 1813), *Maid of Killarney* (published in 1818) and a prose

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<sup>46</sup> Adams, *Celebrated Englishwomen of the Victorian era*, 89.

<sup>47</sup> T. Wemyss Reid, T. Wemyss: *Charlotte Brontë. A monograph* (London: Macmillan and co., 1877), 20.

<sup>48</sup> Glen, *The Cambridge companion to Brontës*, 37.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 24, 30.

<sup>50</sup> Winniffrith and Chitham, *Charlotte and Emily Brontë: literary lives*, 15.

story “The Cottage in the Wood; or, The Art of becoming Rich and Happy” (published also in 1818). Although he was never truly recognized as a successful and good writer, the Brontë siblings were, nevertheless, born into a house where authorship was not a mystery which had a not insignificant meaning for their own writings.<sup>51</sup>

Very important fact about Patrick Brontë in connection to Charlotte is that he intensely believed in education and he thought that girls should be taught as much as boys which was quite an unusual idea for the times he lived in – Charlotte, Emily and Anne were allowed to pick their specialization in education, they could read extensively whatever they wanted as their father did not censor their books, they could discuss politics or simply run freely on the moors.<sup>52</sup> Despite this fact, Branwell, as a boy was considered to be the favoured hope of the family, but the overall lack of sexism in the Brontë household was undeniably a starting point of the Brontë sisters viewing of women as independent and strong individuals who should be equals with men, and they managed to use this idea as one of the central foci of their works. From Charlotte’s letters written after publishing of her works, it is clear her father was very proud of all his daughters’ success and delighted with their fame.<sup>53</sup>

### **3.2. Siblings’ influence**

Charlotte was born as third of six children – there were five girls and one boy in the Brontë household. The following chapters will be dedicated to the only brother – Branwell and to Charlotte’s sisters Emily and Anne who were also published authors and who inspired and influenced each other. However, although Charlotte’s oldest sisters Maria and Elizabeth died very young, when Charlotte was only nine years old, their lives and deaths still had a significant impact on the remaining siblings. Therefore, I would like to spend few lines on these two, nearly forgotten Brontë sisters.

After their mother’s death, the four oldest Brontë girls – Maria, Elizabeth, Charlotte and Emily were sent to the Clergy Daughter’s School at Cowan Bridge where Maria and Elizabeth, the eldest of the sisters got sick of tuberculosis and died at home in the spring of 1825. However, after these tragic events, the remaining Brontë siblings formed an intense bond between them and only after that did their start with their games

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<sup>51</sup> Birrell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 81.

<sup>52</sup> Winniffrith and Chitham, *Charlotte and Emily Brontë: literary lives*, 16.

<sup>53</sup> Shorter, *Charlotte Brontë and her circle*, 52.

and early writings.<sup>54</sup> Together, the Brontë sisters later formed a phenomenon – as Kenneth King says, they “catalysed each other and their prodigious imaginations synergized a larger constellation of literary discovery”<sup>55</sup>.

The legacy of Maria Brontë, the oldest sister, who is often described as delicate, very intelligent and thoughtful child is believed by many biographers to live in the character of Helen Burns of Charlotte’s *Jane Eyre*. When she and Elizabeth died, Charlotte became the eldest sister with all the responsibilities as the children’s mother was dead. It is then evident from many letters and actions of Charlotte she accepted the motherly role and was always considered to be the reasonable and caring sister. Her deep sense of responsibility and need for soberness is also reflected in her work.

### **3.2.1. Branwell – world of Angria and impact of his fall**

Branwell Brontë was born in 1817, one year after the birth of Charlotte. Closest to Charlotte’s age, he became her companion both in playing and in writing. It was with Branwell Charlotte worked on their imaginary world of Angria, creating stories of different heroes and discussing their juvenile literary attempts. During these times, although both were just children, they were without any doubt influencing and inspiring each other’s work and thus also shaping their writing styles. In their early writings and plays, they also often touched upon the issues of authorship, professional recognition or earning a living by writing, suggesting they had great aspirations as well as anxieties regarding their potential future careers in publishing books.<sup>56</sup>

Even though Branwell was not successful in publishing any of his books during his short life, it was certainly not for the lack of trying. He wrote and sent his poems to great poets of the times – Wordsworth and Coleridge, who were both supportive, and he even managed to have some of his poems published in papers such as the *Halifax Guardian* or *Leeds Intelligence* proving his work was by no means without any quality. Had his life not ended so soon, he might have ultimately succeeded in publishing his works and thus stand in line with his sisters as is often speculated in various biographies.

As the only son in the family, there were great expectations and hopes from

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<sup>54</sup> Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, 2-3.

<sup>55</sup> King, “Obsession – Beginning with the Brontës: A Revisitation”, 241.

<sup>56</sup> Glen, *The Cambridge companion to The Brontës*, 38-39.

Branwell. These expectations of success from the only son of the family were on one hand a heavy burden on him, and on the other it meant a great deal of freedom to his sisters who were thus able to produce work of their own will.<sup>57</sup> Branwell is usually described as very intelligent, charming and of remarkable conversational talents.<sup>58</sup> He also engaged extensively in painting – the most famous picture of the Brontë sisters was in fact produced by him. Branwell was even supposed to receive formal education at the Royal Academy, however, this plan of his father was never fulfilled – Elizabeth Gaskell suggests it was due to lack of finances.<sup>59</sup> To support their brother's education (as well as to secure themselves in case of their father's death), the Brontë sisters decided to venture into the world as governesses, which was one of the turning points of the future careers of Charlotte and Anne as their governessing experience was instrumental in their novels.

Branwell then experienced different kinds of employment but he mostly struggled through all of them. He started as a portrait painter in Bradford only to return home one year later in debt. Afterwards, he got employed as a tutor by the Postlethwaites at Broughton-in-Furness, then as clerk on railway in Halifax. In 1843 he joined his younger sister Anne at Thorp Green to work as a tutor for Mr. and Mrs. Robinsons' son Edmund. He was dismissed from his last employment two years later due to his affair with his employer's wife, Lydia Robinson. This romantic affair has been wildly discussed probably in all biographies on the Brontë family, including Elizabeth Gaskell's famous "Life" for which she faced legal problems forcing her to rewrite the whole section touching upon the relationship.<sup>60</sup>

After these events, Branwell returned to Haworth where he continued writing poetry while engaging himself in drugs and heavy drinking in a local pub. In one of her letters published in her biography from 1877 written by English biographer and newspaper editor Sir Thomas Wemyss Reid, Charlotte describes the situation of Branwell as follows:

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<sup>57</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 7.

<sup>58</sup> Reid, *Charlotte Brontë. A monograph*, 40-41.

<sup>59</sup> Gaskell, *The Life and works of Charlotte Brontë and her sisters*, 183.

<sup>60</sup> Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, 78.

I wish I could say anything favourable; but how can we be more comfortable so long as Branwell stays at home and degenerates instead of improving? [...] He will not work, and at home he is a drain on every resource, an impediment to all happiness.<sup>61</sup>

It was during these difficult times Charlotte and her sisters tried to publish their novels, when Charlotte's *The Professor* was rejected and when finally, in 1847 she managed to have her novel *Jane Eyre* see the light of the world after it was published by Smith, Elder and Company in October followed by her sister's works *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*. In less than a year after his sisters' success and after becoming a burden to his family, Branwell died on September 1848 at Haworth parsonage aged 31. Charlotte comments on her and her family's feelings about the tragic event in another letter of hers addressed to her friend Ellen Nussey and published in Elizabeth Gaskell's biography:

Till the last hour comes we never know how much we can forgive, pity, regret a near relative. All his vices were and are nothing now. We remember only his woes. Papa was acutely distressed at first, but, on the whole, has born the event well. Emily and Anne are pretty well, though Anne is always delicate, and Emily has a cold and cough at present. It was my fate to sink at the crisis, when I should have collected my strength.<sup>62</sup>

In her biography of Charlotte, Elizabeth Gaskell points out the tragic event of Branwell's death had a greatly negative impact on Charlotte and her sisters, however, Reid argues that Charlotte was "too brave, healthy, and reasonable in all things to be utterly weighted down by the fact that her brother had fallen a victim to loathsome vice"<sup>63</sup> which he supports by a passage taken from Charlotte's novel *The Professor*, in which he states Charlotte provides her thoughts on Branwell's fall:<sup>64</sup>

I saw a mind degraded by the practice of mean subterfuge, by the habit of perfidious deception, and a body depraved by the infectious influence of the vice-polluted soul. I had suffered much from the forced and prolonged view of this spectacle; those sufferings I did not now regret, for their simple recollection acted as a most wholesome antidote to temptation.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Reid, *Charlotte Brontë. A monograph*, 69.

<sup>62</sup> Gaskell, *The Life and works of Charlotte Brontë and her sisters*, 374.

<sup>63</sup> Reid, *Charlotte Brontë. A monograph*, 74.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>65</sup> Charlotte Brontë: *The Professor* (London: Harper Press, 2012), 194.

### 3.2.2. Emily – friendship, authorship and impact of her death

Emily Brontë, the author of one of the most shocking novels of her times *Wuthering Heights* was born two years after Charlotte, in 1818. Emily was Charlotte's closest companion in their first school Cowan Bridge and later, in their twenties, they also went together to Brussels in 1842. Nevertheless, Emily was always much closer to her other sister, Anne, with whom she was almost inseparable since they were children and “worked” together on their imaginary world of Gondal.

As a person as well as a writer, Emily is still a sort of a mystery as she either provokes admiration of her wild and free spirit she reflected in her complex novel, or a complete misapprehension of her unconditional passion and violence which may be found in *Wuthering Heights*. Literary critic Clement Shorter even called her the sphinx of the modern literature in 1896 as she did not leave any significant record for defining her character or opinions beside her only novel and a few poems.<sup>66</sup> Charlotte probably destroyed both Emily's and Anne's correspondence, nevertheless, we can get some account of what kind of person Emily was from Charlotte's own letters where she depicted Emily as “a wilful child, who has to be humoured or manipulated” as well as a very private woman who was afraid to be spied out by strangers and who insisted on her not to be recognized as the author of *Wuthering Heights*.<sup>67</sup> When in the autumn of 1845 Charlotte accidentally came across some of her sister's poems, Emily was not very pleased with this intrusion into her thoughts, and per Charlotte's account, it took days to persuade Emily to publish these poems along with some of the poems written by Charlotte and Anne under pen names.<sup>68</sup> Of the three sisters, Emily insisted the most on remaining “invisible” under her pen name Ellis Bell and she was very angry when she learned in 1848 that Charlotte had revealed the identity of Currer, Acton and Ellis Bell to their publisher.<sup>69</sup> Nowadays, Emily's poetry is recognized as the best and most powerful of all three sisters.

After the poems were published, Emily started working in Haworth on her *Wuthering Heights*, a novel greatly inspired by the moors she loved so much, not only in the fact the landscape plays an important role in the novel as the story takes place on

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<sup>66</sup> Shorter, *Charlotte Brontë and her circle*, 144.

<sup>67</sup> Stevie Davies: *Emily Brontë* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2007), 5, 13.

<sup>68</sup> Winniffrith and Chitham, *Charlotte and Emily Brontë: literary lives*, 9.

<sup>69</sup> Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, 173.

the moors, but nature in general is the driving force of the novel with all its passions and symbolism. It is well known of Emily that she was very much tied to her home in Haworth and to the moors as she has always fallen homesick when gone. This fact, the nature of the connection Emily had with the moors and her sister's care is demonstrated in one of Charlotte's letters where she states:

My sister Emily loved the moors. Flowers brighter than the red rose bloomed in the blackest of the heath for her; - out of a sullen hollow in a livid hillside her mind could make an Eden. She found in the bleak solitude many and dear delights; and not the least and best-loved was - liberty. Liberty was the breath of Emily's nostrils; without it she perished. The change from her own home to a school, and from her own very noiseless, very secluded, but unrestricted and unartificial mode of life, to one of disciplined routine was what she failed in enduring. [...] Every morning, when she woke, the vision of home and the moors rushed on her, and darkened and saddened the day that lay before her. Nobody knew what ailed her but me. I knew only too well. In this struggle her health was quickly broken: her white face, attenuated form, and failing strength, threatened rapid decline. I felt in my heart she would die, if she did not go home, and with this conviction obtained her recall.<sup>70</sup>

Moors in *Wuthering Heights* are the symbol of a sanctuary covering for the loss of mothers who turn back to earth in their death.<sup>71</sup> The themes of mother-loss, as well as of alter-ego and violence in human affairs we may find in Emily's novels can also be traced in Charlotte's novels, though these novels may not seem similar in terms of the story.<sup>72</sup>

Two years later, in 1847, *Wuthering Heights* was published still under her pen name Ellis Bell by Thomas Newby and Son. As she died on December 1848 after falling fatally ill and refusing to see a doctor and take prescribed pills, she has not lived up to see her novel becoming famous. Charlotte reflects on her sister's death, which affected her greatly, in a poetic letter addressed to Ellen Nussey:

Emily suffers no more from pain or weakness now. She will never suffer more in this world. She is gone, after a hard, short conflict. [...] Yes, there is no Emily in time or on earth now. Yesterday, we put her poor, wasted, mortal frame quietly under the church pavement. We are very calm at present. Why should we be otherwise? The anguish of

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<sup>70</sup> Birrell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 57-58.

<sup>71</sup> Davies, *Emily Brontë*, 27.

<sup>72</sup> Glen, *The Cambridge companion to the Brontës*, 74.

seeing her suffer is over; the spectacle of the pains of death is gone by; the funeral day is past. We feel she is at peace. No need now to tremble for the hard frost and the keen wind. Emily does not feel them. She died in a time of promise. We saw her taken from life in its prime. But it is God's will, and the place where she is gone is better than she has left.<sup>73</sup>

In another letter, written to Mr. Williams four days later, Charlotte describes the mood in the family after Emily's death and her legitimate fear for the life of her sister Anne:

My father and my sister Anne are far from well. As for me, God has hitherto most graciously sustained me; so far I have felt adequate to bear my own burden and even to offer a little help to others. I am not ill; I can get through daily duties, and do something towards keeping hope and energy alive in our mourning household. [...] The sight of my sister Anne's very still but deep sorrow wakens in me such fear for her that I dare not falter. Somebody must cheer the rest.<sup>74</sup>

This letter suggested Charlotte tried to occupy her mind as much as possible to get over Emily's death. In these times, she was working on her next novel – Shirley, which was published in 1849, and in which she used some of Emily's characteristics in the eponymous character to pay tribute to her loved sister. Even Elizabeth Gaskell in her "Life" mentions this fact and explains that even though she herself did not have a very good impression of Emily, it is important to note there is not much known about her compared to her other sisters and that Charlotte tried to "depict her character in Shirley Keeldar, as what Emily Brontë would have been, had she been placed in health and prosperity".<sup>75</sup>

The revelation Ellis Bell was in fact Emily Brontë was only revealed after her death and the fact shocked the public. It was believed that man wrote the novel as readers could not believe a woman was capable of writing something so "coarse" and "violent" – there were even speculations it was her brother Branwell who was the author of *Wuthering Heights*. Charlotte herself did not really approve of the book and she tried her best to justify her sister's work – in a manner which was very similar to that of Elizabeth Gaskell who did the same with Charlotte's works. Brontë pointed out in her "Biographical notice of Ellis and Acton Bell" that 'neither Emily nor Anne was learned' and they 'always wrote from the impulses of nature, the dictates of intuition,

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<sup>73</sup> Shorter, *Charlotte Brontë and her circle*, 174.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>75</sup> Gaskell, *The Life and works of Charlotte Brontë and her sisters*, 414.

and from such stores of observation as their limited experience had enable them to amass' in order to cleanse people's views of her sisters.<sup>76</sup> She commented that *Wuthering Heights* contained debased emotions and perverted impulses and these were not entirely purified.<sup>77</sup>

In 1850, when *Wuthering Heights* as well as Anne's *Agnes Grey* were to be republished, Charlotte wrote a letter to Mr. Williams in which she provides her opinion of Emily's novel and proposes to write a preface for it:

It is my intention to write a few lines of remark on *Wuthering Heights*, which, however, I propose to place apart as a brief preface before the tale. I am likewise compelling myself to read it over, for the first time of opening the book since my sister's death. Its power fills me with renewed admiration; but yet I am oppressed: the reader is scarcely ever permitted a taste of unalloyed pleasure; every beam of sunshine is poured down through black bars of threatening cloud; every passage is surcharged with a sort of moral electricity; and the writer was unconscious of all this – nothing could make her conscious of it.<sup>78</sup>

Charlotte then in the same letter proposes that she would like to revise and edit the novel before its republishing:

I should wish to revise the proofs, if it be not too great an inconvenience to send them. It seems to me advisable to modify the orthography of the old servant Joseph's speeches; for though as it stands it exactly renders the Yorkshire dialect to a Yorkshire year, yet I am sure Southerners must find it unintelligible; and thus, one of the most graphic characters in the book is lost on them.<sup>79</sup>

In a letter to Ellen Nussey, Charlotte admits all this revising, transcribing, editing and writing a preface was keeping her very busy as well as depressed as she found the task "exquisitely painful; but regarding it in the light of a sacred duty".<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Davies, *Emily Brontë*, 39.

<sup>77</sup> Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, 177.

<sup>78</sup> Gaskell, *The Life and works of Charlotte Brontë and her sisters*, 481.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 481-2.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 482.

### 3.2.3. Anne – the sister to protect and cherish

Ann Brontë was the youngest of the surviving Brontë children and the one whose works are the least regarded and least known today. Some biographers, including Clement Shorter, already in 1896 suggested Anne's two novels – *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* would be long forgotten were it not for the association of Anne with her two famous sisters.<sup>81</sup> Though not so popular, there is however no doubt Anne's novels are of high artistic quality and we may argue that were they not so overshadowed by her sister's books, they may have even gained much more recognition. It took over a century after Anne's death before a proper biography of her was written.

The lower interest in Anne's novels compared to works of Charlotte and Emily may also be in a way connected to the fact that in basically every biography of the Brontës, Anne was always regarded as the least "interesting", and therefore not much space was dedicated to her. It is known Anne had a deep connection with Emily since their childhood and that she was the most gentle, fragile and beautiful of the three sisters as well as the least educated and travelled. Her only experience outside of her home in Haworth was of when she worked as a governess first at Blake Hall and later at Thorp Green where she suffered from her brother's affair with the mistress.<sup>82</sup>

Anne then published some of her poems together with her sisters and later finished her first novel *Agnes Grey* which became available to public under her pen name Acton Bell in 1847. In this first novel of hers, Anne draws on her experience as a governess and provides an insight as to what it is and how it feels to be a governess. Her account is different from that of her sister Charlotte as the general mood of the novel is much more positive, tranquil and thoughtful owing to Anne's devoted Christianity. It lacks the passion and drama of her sister's novels and offers a more meditative view of life, love and work instead. We may find reflection of her attitude towards life in the novel, when the narrator (Agnes) states: "I sometimes felt degraded by the life I led, and ashamed of submitting to so many indignities; and sometimes I thought myself a fool for caring so much about them, and feared I must be sadly wanting for Christian humility..."<sup>83</sup>.

Per the Welsh author Stevie Davies, *Agnes Grey* is "one of the undervalued works of

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<sup>81</sup> Shorter, *Charlotte Brontë and her circle*, 181.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 183-184.

<sup>83</sup> Anne Brontë: *Agnes Grey* (London: Harper Press, 2011), 75.

Victorian fiction”.<sup>84</sup> Davies adds that at the times the novel was published, the readers must have noticed the author was a female as there were many details of the ‘female world’ in the book and this ‘women’s’ experience was then devalued as trivial which “obscured the veracity of Anne’s narrative”.<sup>85</sup>

It was, however, Anne’s second novel – *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* - which provoked much more attention, discussion and also criticism. In the novel, Anne’s heroine Helen deals with the abusive behaviour and alcoholism of her husband Arthur. She seeks help in her faith to endure the life under her husband’s tyranny but finds courage to leave him once she realizes Arthur corrupts their little son. Helen then abducts the child and hides in a foreign country. The graphic description of Arthur’s violence, drunkenness, bad language and adultery is believed to be inspired by Branwell Brontë whose decline caused by opium addiction and heavy drinking Anne and her sisters had to endure themselves.<sup>86</sup> Anne supports these speculations in the preface she wrote for the novel where she touches upon the character of Arthur: “...the case is an extreme one, as I trusted none would fail to perceive; but I knew that such characters do exist, and if I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain”<sup>87</sup>

After the novel was published, many readers were disgusted by the vivid portrayal of a toxic family environment and of a wife leaving her husband and living alone with a child among strangers, and the book was thus labelled as coarse and vulgar. To defend herself, Anne wrote a preface for the second edition of the novel (which was issued not long after the first one, proving that despite unfavourable reviews the book sold well) in which Anne explicitly demands equality for female writers – in it, Anne states she is “satisfied that if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author may be. [...] I am at a loss to conceive how a man should permit himself to write anything that would be really disgraceful to a woman, or why a woman should be censured for writing anything that would be proper and becoming for a man”<sup>88</sup>.

Similarly, as with Emily and her *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte also attempted to

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<sup>84</sup> Glen, *The Cambridge companion to the Brontës*, 84.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>86</sup> Glen, *The Cambridge companion to the Brontës*, 101.

<sup>87</sup> Shorter, *Charlotte Brontë and her circle*, 185.

<sup>88</sup> Anne Brontë, “Preface to the Second Edition,” in Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (London: Harper Press, 2011), 5.

restore Anne's reputation which was impaired by the critical outrage induced by *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in attempt to push her from the public eye. Unfortunately, Charlotte did this by describing her sister's book as a mistake which should never have been written and that Anne was a pure person who knew only little of disturbing realities.<sup>89</sup> However, Charlotte paid much more attention to Emily and her novel and did not comment on Anne's second work much further.

Shortly after Emily's death, Anne had fallen ill with tuberculosis and although unlike Emily, she let the doctors tend to her, her health kept deteriorating and she died only three months later. In the letters she wrote during Anne's illness, it was apparent Charlotte knew she was going to lose her last sister as well. Only few days before Anne's death she even informed Mr. Williams she "must not expect her to last long"<sup>90</sup> and on May 30<sup>th</sup> she wrote him the following lines:

My dear sir, - My poor sister is taken quietly home at last. She died on Monday. With almost her last breath she said she was happy, and thanked God that death was come, and come so gently. I did not think it would be so soon. You will not expect me to add more at present. - Yours faithfully, C. Brontë.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Miller, *The Brontë myth*, 157.

<sup>90</sup> Shorter, *Charlotte Brontë and her circle*, 200.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

#### 4. Education - Cowan Bridge and Roe Head

After receiving basic education from her father, eight-years-old Charlotte was sent to the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge along with her younger sister Emily. Both stayed at this school for only one year during which their older sisters Maria and Elizabeth, who studied in the same institution, had died. Cowan Bridge was a relatively cheap school (£14 a year including clothing, lodging, boarding and education) which was to provide a suitable education for daughters of the poor clergy – there were about eighty pupils in 1824 when Elizabeth and Maria first arrived.<sup>92</sup> In these times, education for girls was still far behind that for boys as the educational reforms took place in England only during the second half of the nineteenth century – for girls, the chief profession they were studying for was governess.<sup>93</sup>

The school at Cowan Bridge is very often presumed to be the chief inspiration for the Lowood School of Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*. In Charlotte's early biographies, it is described as "ill managed", food was often burned or tainted, the whole place smelt badly and the young students were all suffering from a harsh discipline.<sup>94</sup> The greatest villain of the novel – Mr. Brocklehurst was in fact based on a real-life person William Carus Wilson who was the Evangelical patron of the school – Charlotte even wrote to William Smith Williams that an old clergymen she knew recognized himself in the character and only owing to the pen name she used was she spared of being recognized as the author.<sup>95</sup> The characters of kind Miss Temple and evil Miss Scatcherd are also believed to be based on the teachers from the school.

Elizabeth Gaskell herself underwent a research of the institution and stated in her biography of Charlotte that the food in the school was indeed of poor quality and the house was placed in an unhealthy location not suitable for delicate children like the Brontës.<sup>96</sup> However, there is also a contradictory statement provided by one of the teachers from the Cowan Bridge school who argues Charlotte herself was never punished, disgraced or in any way limited and that all children were always provided

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<sup>92</sup> Birrell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 36-37.

<sup>93</sup> Winnifrith and Chitham, *Charlotte and Emily Brontë: literary lives*, 40.

<sup>94</sup> Birrell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 37.

<sup>95</sup> Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, 16.

<sup>96</sup> Gaskell, *The Life and works of Charlotte Brontë and her sisters*, 69-70.

with a sufficient amount of food.<sup>97</sup>

We may not know to what extent the description of Lowood is identical to the reality of Cowan Bridge, there is however no doubt Charlotte drew considerable amount of inspiration from the time she spent in the institution for her most famous novel *Jane Eyre*. It is also important to note her view of the school and the overall experience there was heavily burdened by the deaths of her two sisters.

After Charlotte and Emily left Cowan Bridge at last, after staying there for ten months, they remained at home in Haworth for almost six years during which the Brontë children created their first literary attempts and engaged in their creative plays and extensive reading. The three sisters and their brother grew even closer, became best friends, playmates and companions while writing plays, poems and romances, reading and debating about politics.<sup>98</sup> For all these reasons, the time she spent at home before going to school again was of a great significance for Charlotte's development as a writer.<sup>99</sup>

In 1831, nearly six years after her horrific experience at Lowood, Charlotte became a boarder at Miss Wooller's school at Roe Head situated about twenty miles from Haworth. Charlotte's greatest accomplishments she gained at this school were her striking improvement of French (which was later very important during her stay in Brussel) and her drawing skills.<sup>100</sup> She also made two friends there – Ellen Nussey and Mary Taylor and their friendship lasted until Charlotte's death. Mary was kind of a female rebel with daring opinions and she greatly supported Charlotte's ambitions and independence while Ellen was quite the opposite – calm, observant, dutiful and religious girl who was always there to listen to Charlotte.<sup>101</sup> This duality, this 'angel' and a 'devil' on Charlotte's shoulders, her two close friends, are often made into one person in the characters of her novels. Although on the first sight it seems Charlotte preferred the duty and the religion as the driving force of her characters, it is only with their passion and longing for equality and independence with which her characters explore their morality and their souls enabling them to understand themselves. This masterful combination of feelings is what makes her characters so believable and inspiring.

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<sup>97</sup> Shorter, *Charlotte Brontë and her circle*, 74-75.

<sup>98</sup> Adams, *Celebrated Englishwomen of the Victorian era*, 93.

<sup>99</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 4.

<sup>100</sup> Shorter, *Charlotte Brontë and her circle*, 75.

<sup>101</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 6.

To return to the topic of education Charlotte received at Roe Head, there is a letter Charlotte wrote when she was eighteen to her friend she made at the school - Ellen, and from which we may get an idea of her course of reading and literary inspirations as in this letter, she provides recommendations and criticism of various books:

...If you like poetry, let it be first-rate: Milton, Shakespeare, Thomson, Goldsmith, Pope (you will, though I don't admire him), Scott, Byron, Campbell, Wordsworth and Southey. Now, don't be startled at the names of Shakespeare and Byron. Both these were great men, and their works are like themselves. You will know how to choose the good and to avoid the evil: the finest passages are always the purest, the bad are invariably revolting; you will never wish to read them over twice. Omit the comedies of Shakespeare, and the "Don Juan," perhaps the "Cain," of Byron, though the latter is a magnificent poem, and read the rest fearlessly. [...] Scott's sweet, wild, romantic poetry can do you no harm. Nor can Wordsworth's, nor Campbell's, nor Southey's - the greatest part, at least, of his; some is certainly objectionable. [...] For fiction, read Scott alone; all novels after his are worthless.<sup>102</sup>

The school of Roe Head was only a small one, counting about seven to ten pupils who were taken care of by Miss Wooler - a lady of remarkable intelligence, whose nature is described by Elizabeth Gaskell as kind and motherly owing to which the establishment felt more like a private family than a school.<sup>103</sup> Charlotte's schooldays came to an end in 1832 and she returned back to Haworth where she and her sisters received drawing lessons from a master - this experience per Charlotte's own words affected her greatly as her drawing, just like her novels, were directed to deal primarily with the realities of her very own feelings.<sup>104</sup>

During the time Charlotte spent at Roe Head, she became Miss Wooler's favourite and she later returned to the school as a teacher - this time accompanied by her seventeen-years-old sister Emily who was to become a pupil at Roe Head (she was replaced by Anne after three months). In a letter to Ellen Nussey, Charlotte states she preferred to become a teacher for Miss Wooler to "one or two proposals of private governess-ship" she had received before.<sup>105</sup> However, in 1838 Charlotte left Dewsbury Moor where the school was moved in 1836 due to illness and after staying for a while at

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<sup>102</sup> Adams, *Celebrated Englishwomen of Victorian era*, 96-97.

<sup>103</sup> Gaskell, *The Life and works of Charlotte Brontë and her sisters*, 99.

<sup>104</sup> Birrell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 51.

<sup>105</sup> Adams, *Celebrated Englishwomen of Victorian era*, 98.

Haworth, she ventured into the world as governess at last. The education Charlotte Brontë received both at Cowan Bridge was of great importance for writing development – both for what she learned and for what she experienced, also the friends she made during her studies later proved to be of significant influence impacting her novels in various ways.

## 5. Charlotte Brontë as a governess – inspiration for Jane Eyre

Charlotte did not take much pleasure in teaching and was not truly fond of children, therefore she was not very keen on becoming a governess, however, for a woman of her station and education, there was scarcely much choice available for her. Furthermore, the education Charlotte and her sisters received did not qualify them then to teach advanced, older pupils with whom they may get along better than with small children.<sup>106</sup>

Shortly before going on the path of this profession, Charlotte received her first proposal of marriage from reverend Henry Nussey – brother of Charlotte’s friend Ellen, whom she described as “an amiable and well-disposed man”<sup>107</sup> However, as Charlotte did not feel any attachment towards him – she did not love him, and she neither believed he loved her as he knew so little about her.<sup>108</sup> Thus, Charlotte rather chose a profession she was not very keen on then venturing into a loveless marriage – an occurrence very relatable to Jane Eyre’s refusal to marry St. John. In the very same book, Charlotte also masterfully utilized her experience from working as a governess.

Charlotte’s first position as a governess outside of school was in the family of a wealthy Yorkshire manufacturer Mr. Sidgwick at Stonegappe. Though Charlotte was very pleased with the nature surrounding the place and she was quite fond of Mr. Sidgwick, she found it hard to take pleasure in her work and her station and she describes her feelings in a letter sent to her sister Emily in June 1839:

[...] The children are constantly with me, and more riotous, perverse, unmanageable cubs never grew. As for correcting them, I soon quickly found that that was entirely out of the question: they are to do as they like. A complaint to Mrs. Sidgwick brings only black looks upon oneself, and unjust, partial excuses to screen the children. I have tried that plan once. It succeeded so notably that I shall try it no more. I said in my last letter that Mrs. Sidgwick did not know me. I now begin to find that she does not intend to know me, that she cares nothing in the world about me except to contrive how the greatest possible quantity of labour may be squeezed out of me. [...] I do not think she likes me at all, because I can’t help being sky in such an entirely novel scene, surrounded as I have hitherto been by strange and constantly changing faces. I see now more clearly than I

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<sup>106</sup> Gaskell, *The Life and works of Charlotte Brontë and her sisters*, 170.

<sup>107</sup> Birrell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 66.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 66.

have ever done before that a private governess has no existence, is not considered as a living and rational being except as connected with wearisome duties she has to fulfil.<sup>109</sup>

The solitude of governess' life, her inferiority and feeling of unimportance may be found especially in Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* and the same feelings are also prominent in Anne's *Agnes Grey*. Both Charlotte and Anne found themselves in a strange position when they were not considered neither as servants nor as family members while spending most of their time with children they could not manage to attach to. While the loneliness of such life may provoke pity, Charlotte always hoped for better days and never gave in to the desperation. She claims so in another letter written to Ellen Nussey after she left her position with the Sidgwick family and returned to Haworth: "I know I cannot live with a person like Mrs. Sidgwick but I hope all women are not like her, and my motto is "try again"."<sup>110</sup>

Moreover, without such experience, she probably would not have enough inspiration to be able to write her most famous novel in which she could point out the issues connected with being a governess which was a ground breaking and brave move in her times. An article written and published in 1856 in *Household Words* gives credit to *Jane Eyre* for its completely realistic picture of the governess life and the author of the article even claims to have known many similar cases in which governesses were forced to fight against the 'blandishments' of their employers – however, without Jane's romantic outcome.<sup>111</sup>

Before her next employment as a governess, Brontë received another proposal of marriage. This time from a young Irish clergyman James Bryce who visited Brontës in Haworth with the vicar one day. A few days after the encounter, Charlotte received a letter from the young man in which he was asking for her hand in marriage. Charlotte informed her friend Ellen about this event in a letter and she found the whole situation very amusing. She then finishes the letter stating:

I am certainly doomed to be an old maid. Never mind. I made up my mind to that fate ever since I was twelve years old. Well! Though I, I have heard of love at first sight, but this beats all! I leave you to guess what my answer would be, convinced that you will not do me the injustice of guessing wrong.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Shorter, *Charlotte Brontë and her circle*, 80-81.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>111</sup> Glen, *The Cambridge companion to the Brontës*, 180.

<sup>112</sup> Gaskell, *The Life and works of Charlotte Brontë and her sisters*, 179.

History repeated itself and two years after she refused her second suitor, Charlotte went on to find a second and last employment as a governess. This started in March 1841 when she entered the family of Mr. White of Upperwood House in Rawdon where she was to take care of education of two children – a girl of eight and a boy of six.<sup>113</sup>

Although Brontë spoke kindly about her employers, the Whites (in one of the letters written to Ellen Nussey she even states she liked Mr. White “extremely”)<sup>114</sup>, she still had difficulties with managing the children and getting used to the loneliness of her profession. In one of her many letters, she writes: “The children are overindulged, and consequently hard to manage. I have got on very well with the servants and children so far, yet it is dreary, solitary work.”<sup>115</sup> The protagonist of her second novel, *Jane Eyre* and later Lucy Snow in *Villette* who worked as a teacher had the very same experience as they struggled to manage their pupils while enduring feelings of burdening alienation.

Even though Brontë’s position in this second employment was undoubtedly better than her experience as a governess, Charlotte still was not entirely happy. She longed for something more and this longing was heightened by the prospect of going abroad as she tells Ellen Nussey in a letter: “...besides, I burn to go somewhere else. I think, Nell, I see a chance of getting to Brussels. Mary Taylor advises me to this step. My own mind and feelings urge me.”<sup>116</sup> Charlotte’s excitement to go to Belgium grew stronger with time and after her aunt agreed to cover the expenses for her and Emily, they could start to plan the journey to the continent and with this decision to travel abroad, they also dismissed their original plan to establish a school of their own.

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<sup>113</sup> Birrell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 77.

<sup>114</sup> Gaskell, *The Life and works of Charlotte Brontë and her sisters*, 204.

<sup>115</sup> Birrell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 73.

<sup>116</sup> Shorter, *Charlotte Brontë and her circle*, 91.

## 6. Brussel experience – development of writing skills and inspiration for novels

Together with her sister Emily, Charlotte left for Brussels in 1842 where the two young women were to stay at the Pensionnat de Demoiselles to improve their French, drawing and music skills and to learn German. The school was run by Mrs. and Mr. Héger who also became one of the tutors of the sisters. Impressed by the intelligence and determination of both sisters, the Hégers offered them to prolong their stay without having to pay tuition fees in exchange of the sisters' services as music and English teachers and although this plan was interrupted by the death of their aunt Elizabeth after which both sisters returned to Haworth, Charlotte alone returned to Brussels in 1843 to become an English teacher and for this situation, she was receiving sixteen pounds a month from which she paid ten francs a month to continue her German lessons.<sup>117</sup>

### 6.1. Inspiration for *The Professor* and *Villette*

Brontë's stay in Belgium is often perceived as one of the most important experience for her upcoming literary career. T. Wemyss Reid in his biography of Charlotte even states that it was not Branwell's fall what made Brontë write about her feelings, but the visit to Brussels which was a turning point in Charlotte's life and which gave her a new purpose and meaning.<sup>118</sup> Although it is undoubtedly true the Brussel experience had much influence on Brontë's future novels as she based her two books, *The Professor* and later *Villette* on her stay in Belgium, it is clear Brontë had literary ambitions much earlier than that – even earlier than her brother and his family with him went through horrors of alcoholism and violence. Ever since Charlotte and her siblings were just children, they were thinking about authorship and becoming famous writers, therefore we may see the experience Brontë went through in Brussel as a great inspiration and a source of a lot of material for her stories but not as something that made her want to become a writer.

Similarly, this inspiration gained in Brussels was often confused with reality as many biographers – Clement Shorter and Elizabeth Gaskell included - stated Charlotte's

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<sup>117</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 13.

<sup>118</sup> Reid, *Charlotte Brontë. A monograph*, 58.

stay in the Pensionnat is very much mirrored in both *The Professor* and *Villette*. This stereotype was observed by another biographer of Charlotte – Augustine Birrell, who criticized such approach in his *Life of Charlotte Brontë* where he argues it is important to “respect the inherent distinctions that must exist between the actual facts and feelings of a person’s life and the record of an imaginary, though it may be similar, life and though we may feel certain that Miss Brontë put her own life into her novels – in fact, the conviction that she did so seriously interferes with the artistic merit of her writings”<sup>119</sup>. Birrell also points out that it is a job of a novelist to entertain the reader and to provide something interesting to read and for these purposes he or she may adjust their own experience and feelings and in her novels, that is exactly what Brontë did – it is even clearer when we compare the two novels that were influenced by her stay in Belgium as these are different in many ways despite their similarity which is caused by their same basis.<sup>120</sup>

It is true, however, that much like her characters, Charlotte was not happy as a tutor in the Pensionnat – her solitude which was also deepened by the difference of her religion and her hatred for teaching made her mind suffer. Not only was she burdened by the fact she started to teach again, which she hated, she was also much more alone this time as she returned without her sister Emily and her friend Mary Taylor left Belgium for Germany after the death of her sister.<sup>121</sup> Among about a hundred of pupils who studied at the school at that time, most of the girls were Belgian and therefore Roman Catholics and Charlotte as an English Protestant never had much patience with this religion and this difference of understanding of the world made her feel very secluded and lonely.<sup>122</sup> This state of mind she later communicated in her two “Belgian” novels, especially in *Villette*, in which she masterfully and in great depth dived into the psychology of an extremely lonely person and she managed to resonate this isolation throughout the whole book giving it an almost claustrophobic atmosphere.

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<sup>119</sup> Birrell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 78.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>121</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 13.

<sup>122</sup> Birrell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 79.

## 6.2. Constantine Héger – emotional and professional inspiration

When she returned to Brussels from Haworth after her aunt's death, Charlotte wrote to Ellen Nussey that it was against her conscience to return there as she was 'prompted by what seemed an irresistible impulse' and 'punished for (her) selfish folly by a total withdrawal for more than two years of happiness and peace of mind'<sup>123</sup>.

The publication of this letter gave rise to speculations that Charlotte was in fact passionately in love with Constantine Héger just as her *Villette* heroine Lucy Snowe was with Paul Emanuel. It is true Charlotte became much more dependent on Mr. Héger and much more alienated from his wife after her return, which might be caused by his great support and encouragement of her artistic and intellectual development as well as by romance.<sup>124</sup> There are, however, no proofs Charlotte ever had any romantic affair with her professor, although her strong emotional attachment towards him is documented in many letters she wrote to him after she left the school – but the affection seemed to be only one-sided as he never replied to her. Héger even tried to destroy the letters he received from Charlotte and if it was not for his wife who saved and put these back together and their daughter Louise who preserved these letters and later donated these to the British Museum, there would be no documentation of Charlotte's fiercely passionate affection towards her teacher at all.<sup>125</sup>

Though the relationship between Brontë and Monsieur Héger is a private matter and it is not of any importance whether they were romantically involved or not, it is clear from her letters that Brontë, owing to this acquaintance, was able to explore her passion just as her teacher encouraged to do, and she was later able to transfer these elements into her novels and into the relationships of characters she created. Therefore, her connection with Héger should be taken into consideration as a great point of Charlotte's inspiration which helped her develop her stories.

Brontë's sudden estrangement from Madame Héger is also supporting the speculations there was something more going on between Brontë and Monsieur Héger, although Elizabeth Gaskell attributed it to their different religious views causing clashes in their opinions.<sup>126</sup> However, Madame Héger actually refused to see Mrs. Gaskell when

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<sup>123</sup> Shorter, *Charlotte Brontë and her circle*, 108.

<sup>124</sup> Miller, *The Brontë myth*. 11.

<sup>125</sup> Alexandra Mullen, "Charlotte Brontë: Insurrection and Resurrection" *Hudson Review* 69(3) (2016): 433-443, accessed April 10, 2017. ISSN 0018702X.

<sup>126</sup> Gaskell, *The Life and works of Charlotte Brontë and her sisters*. 271.

she called upon her and according to the daughters of Hégers, their father broke off his correspondence with Charlotte as she “showed an undue extravagance of devotion”<sup>127</sup>. Madame Héger made comments on the letters only years later, and she put Charlotte in line with many other schoolgirls who developed hysterical crushes on her husband, but she also added that Brontë as an independent older Englishwoman seemed much more dangerous as she was much more difficult to understand.<sup>128</sup>

Most importantly, Constantine Héger helped Charlotte to strengthen her literary ambitions during her studies in Brussels. He was one of the finest Belgian professors of literature at that time, teaching at the Athénée Royal and was very supportive of Charlotte’s work, and at the same time he was also critical of her writings and made her work very hard on improving her writing skills. He also encouraged Charlotte to explore her creativity, feelings and experience and to transfer it into her work in her own unique style as he put a great emphasis on the technical side of writing, which was later very important for her development as an author.<sup>129</sup>

In conclusion, we may say, Constantine Héger influenced Charlotte’s work to a great extent in many ways – he was a source of emotional inspiration for her as well as a teacher of technique who made Charlotte want to reach perfection in a formal style of her writings in addition to the content.

### **6.3. A visit to a Roman Catholic church – comparison of real life experience and its portrayal in *Villette***

Whatever the true nature of Charlotte’s relationship with Monsieur Héger, the alienation from Madame Héger meant another blow for Charlotte who already felt lonely and she sunk even deeper into her depression. In fact, she actually documented her real and most intense moment of desperation in *Villette* where she described her confession to a Roman Catholic priest which took place after long lonely holidays she spent in Belgium. This part of the novel is one of the most vivid and powerful as it forms a climactic moment of catharsis and its realistic portrayal owes to the fact Charlotte truly experienced it on her own – for comparison, I am adding an excerpt from a letter

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<sup>127</sup> Shorter, *Charlotte Brontë and her circle*. 108.

<sup>128</sup> Miller, *The Brontë myth*. 110.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

Charlotte wrote to Emily in which she informs her sister about the situation and afterwards the excerpt from the novel itself:

Yesterday I went on a pilgrimage to the cemetery, and far beyond it on to a hill where there was nothing but fields as far as the horizon. When I came back it was evening; but I had such a repugnance to return to the house, which contained nothing that I cared for, I still kept threading the streets in the neighbourhood of the Rue d'Isabelle and avoiding it. I found myself opposite to Ste. Gudule, and the bell, whose voice you know, began to toll for evening *salut*. I went in, quite alone (which procedure you will say is not much like me), wandered about the aisles where a few old women were saying their prayers, till vespers begun. [...] Still I could not leave the church or force myself to go home – to school I mean. [...] In a solitary part of the Cathedral six or seven people still remained kneeling by the confessionals. [...] I took a fancy to change myself into a Catholic and go and make a real confession to see what it was like. [...] After I had watched two or three penitents go and return I approached at last and knelt down in a niche which was just vacated. [...] At last a little wooden door inside the grating opened, and I saw the priest leaning his ear towards me. [...] I commenced with saying that I was a foreigner and had been brought up a Protestant. The priest asked if I was a Protestant then. I somehow could not tell a lie and said “yes”. He replied that in that case I cannot (confess); but I was determined to confess, and at last he said he would allow me because it might be the first step towards returning to the true church. I actually did confess – a real confession. When I had done he told me his address, and said [...] he would reason with me and try to convince me of the error and enormity of being a Protestant!!!<sup>130</sup>

Brontë's version of the event she provided in her novel *Villette* is quite similar to her letter above:

That evening more firmly than ever fastened into my soul the conviction that Fate was of stone, and Hope a false idol—blind, bloodless, and of granite core. I felt, too, that the trial God had appointed me was gaining its climax, and must now be turned by my own hands, hot, feeble, trembling as they were. [...] I was sure this hope would shine clearer if I got out from under this house-roof, which was crushing as the slab of a tomb, and went outside the city to a certain quiet hill, a long way distant in the fields. [...] The bells of a church arrested me in passing; they seemed to call me in to the *salut*, and I went in. Any solemn rite, any spectacle of sincere worship, any opening for appeal to God was as welcome to me then as bread to one in extremity of want. I knelt down with others on the

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<sup>130</sup> Shorter. *Charlotte Brontë and her circle*. 117-118.

stone pavement. It was an old solemn church, its pervading gloom not gilded but purpled by light shed through stained glass. Few worshippers were assembled, and, the *salut* over, half of them departed. I discovered soon that those left remained to confess. I did not stir. [...] A pale lady, kneeling near me, said in a low, kind voice:—"Go you now, I am not quite prepared." Mechanically obedient, I rose and went. I knew what I was about; my mind had run over the intent with lightning-speed. To take this step could not make me more wretched than I was; it might soothe me. [...] I hesitated; of the formula of confession I was ignorant: instead of commencing, then, with the prelude usual, I said:—"Mon père, je suis Protestante." He (the priest) directly turned. He inquired, not unkindly, why, being a Protestant, I came to him? I said I was perishing for a word of advice or an accent of comfort. I had been living for some weeks quite alone; I had been ill; I had a pressure of affliction on my mind of which it would hardly any longer endure the weight. [...] "My daughter," he said kindly [...] "It is my own conviction that these impressions under which you are smarting are messengers from God to bring you back to the true Church. [...] Go, my daughter, for the present; but return to me again."<sup>131</sup>

At the end of 1843 Charlotte made up her mind to leave the Pensionnat at last and she left Brussels on 1<sup>st</sup> January of 1844 with low spirits but also with a diploma certifying her to teach French and, most importantly, with a lot of material and new experience for her upcoming novels.

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<sup>131</sup> Brontë, Charlotte. *Villette* (London: Everyman's Publishers, 2000), ch.16.

## 7. The Professor

In this chapter, I would like to focus on Charlotte Brontë's story *The Professor*. Although it was the first novel Charlotte wrote, it was published only posthumously as the last novel of the most famous Brontë sister, and it has received the least attention of her four books. However, it has definitely found its place in the world of literature, and is especially important as a part of Charlotte's artistic development. Therefore, I would like to provide the context of its creation building on the previous chapter which focused on Charlotte's stay in Belgium, the overview of its structure and the themes and features Charlotte included in the first novel she wrote and tried to publish. The last section of this chapter contains remarks on the posthumous publication and public reception of the book.

### 7.1. Context of writing the novel

Charlotte returned to Haworth from her unhappy stay in Belgium in 1844. However, being back with her family did not restore her spirits much – her father was slowly getting blind and her brother's alcoholism was causing distress to the household. Compared to the capital of Belgium, Haworth also seemed “a lonely, quiet spot, buried away from the world”<sup>132</sup>. She also missed Constantine Héger very much as he was her closest companion and artistic advisor during her stay in Brussels and, moreover, her close friend Mary Taylor departure for New Zealand adding to Charlotte's growing depression.<sup>133</sup> Despite the fact she had to endure loneliness and isolation when she stayed abroad, she longed for more – she wanted to travel and explore the world, she wanted to achieve something and instead of that she was back at home, tending to house and her father and again planning to start her own school she eventually failed to do. At the same time, she became to realize she was no longer young as she was nearing her thirties and still, she did not have any success in her life which she expresses in one of her letters:

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<sup>132</sup> Gaskell, *The Life and works of Charlotte Brontë and her sisters*. 273.

<sup>133</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 13.

I know life is passing away, and I am doing nothing, earning nothing; a very bitter knowledge it is at moments, but I see no way out of the mist. Probably, when I am free to leave home, I shall neither be able to find place nor employment. Perhaps, too, I shall be quite past the prime of my life, my faculties would be wasted, and my new acquirements in a great measure forgotten. These ideas sting me keenly sometimes; but whenever I consult my conscience, it affirms that I am right in staying at home, and bitter are its upbraidings when I yield to an eager desire for release.<sup>134</sup>

In addition, the fact she was alone and emotionally frustrated was also weighing down on Brontë. She did not long for marriage (she had rejected two proposals before) but as any other person, she had her romantic and sexual fantasies she was partly ashamed of and the only ventilation of this excess of passion she found in writing.<sup>135</sup>

As her biographer T. Wemyss Reid, who had access to correspondence of Charlotte's predecessor Elizabeth Gaskell had not suggest, Brontë was a strong woman who did not easily give up on her ambitions. And if it was not for her undying artistic ambition and curiosity, she might never have discovered her sister Emily was still writing poems as well as Anne. In 1845, the sisters (after initial reluctance from Emily) decided to use the money they earned to publish a volume of poems together. As they were all aware it would be much easier and acceptable for them to be perceived as males, they chose androgynous pseudonyms Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell. And though to the sisters' disappointment the poems sold only two copies, they did not lose their determination and decided to change their focus to fiction.<sup>136</sup>

Charlotte, embracing her new purpose while still being overwhelmed by her stay in Belgium from where she brought back to Haworth a lot of inspiration and fantasies as well as new literary skills, was now prepared to publish her first novel she first entitled *The Master* only to change it later to *The Professor*. The novel was completed in June 1846 and though Charlotte tried hard to have the book published, it was rejected nine times and in fact never came out in Charlotte's lifetime.<sup>137</sup> Although her first novel was rejected (unlike her sister's novels *Agnes Grey* and *Wuthering Heights*), publishers still encouraged Charlotte not to give up and thus it happened she submitted her novel *Jane Eyre*, which was eventually published even sooner than Anne and Emily's novels.

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<sup>134</sup> Reid, *Charlotte Brontë. A monograph*, 63-64

<sup>135</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 37.

<sup>136</sup> Mullen, "Charlotte Brontë: Insurrection and Resurrection," 441.

<sup>137</sup> Glen, *The Cambridge companion to the Brontës*, 73.

## 7.2. Structure and narrative style

In her first novel, Charlotte decided to make use of her fresh Brussel experience. In the preface Brontë wrote for *The Professor* after she published *Shirley*, she states that her main attempt was to write something “what was plain and homely”<sup>138</sup> and the novel in fact has much simpler structure and narrative style than her other works though it foreshadows elements such as search for independence and equality later found in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. However, the style in general and the overall effect of the novel differs in a great extent from the remaining three Charlotte’s novels.

The most striking difference from Brontë’s other three novels is that in addition to her male pen name she also chose a male narrator for her story. *The Professor* is in fact the only novel from the Brontë sisters narrated from the male point of view. Pauline Nestor argues Brontë’s choice of male narrator was of no great surprise as it made possible for her to stay more outside of what her narrator had to say, to detach herself for her story not to be related to her personal life and especially her relationship with M. Héger.”<sup>139</sup> This is however just a speculation and Nestor’s broader explanation that Charlotte chose for her narrator to be a man in order to make herself more secure by taking on a ‘masculine authority’ before unknown readers seems more plausible.<sup>140</sup>

Living in Victorian times, the choice of a male protagonist also gave Brontë a much more stable ground in terms of what her character could achieve in his life although he started out as an orphan without money or status just like for instance Jane Eyre or Lucy Snow. However, as a male, he inherited certain privileges female did not have. In the preface to the novel, Charlotte says that her hero – young William Crimsworth “should work his way through life as I had seen real living men work theirs – that he should never get a shilling he had not earned – that no sudden turns should lift him in a moment to wealth and high station; that whatever small competency he might gain, should be won by the sweat of his brow...”<sup>141</sup>, causing the novel to be often described as “a narrative of self-help”<sup>142</sup>. This idea was much easier to employ for a male character who can use the power of his gender to achieve all these things. In

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<sup>138</sup> Charlotte Brontë, “Preface to *The Professor*,” in Brontë, *The Professor* (London: Harper Press, 2012), xiii.

<sup>139</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 38.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>141</sup> Brontë, “Preface to *The Professor*,” xiii.

<sup>142</sup> Glen, *The Cambridge companion to the Brontës*, 72.

contrary, these ‘sudden turns’ bringing wealth and station were more convenient for her female characters – Jane, for instance, inherits a large sum of money from her uncle giving her better status in society and thus getting her on the equal level with her love interest.

The whole novel opens with a chapter in the form of a letter the narrator sent to his old friend and a copy of which he now finds in his drawer. After the letter, which is full of narrator’s memories, readers are introduced to the narrative to follow – this introduction fails to provoke much interest in readers as the narrator states the story to come “is not exciting, and above all, not marvellous; but it may interest some individuals, who, having toiled in the same vocation as myself, will find in my experience frequent reflections of their own”<sup>143</sup>. The story then continues in a chronological retrospective narration of William’s experience as he gives account of his life starting when he spent some time working for his tyrannical brother before he ventures for Brussels where he secures a situation as a teacher and falls for the headmistress, Mademoiselle Reuter – however, he later learns she is already betrothed and, moreover, that she is a very manipulative woman. When he later falls in love with a new teacher at the school, Frances Henri, the headmistress soon fires her and refuses to give William her address. Even without knowing where to look his love, Crimsworth finally finds her in a cemetery where she mourns her deceased aunt.

The narrative technique as such is described by Stevie Davies as “at once guileful and naïve, casuistical and cloven”<sup>144</sup>. The story itself is also quite simple and lacks the complexity and twists of Charlotte’s upcoming novels, however, as stated above, that was exactly her intention as she meant to write a ‘homely’ novel that may not be very exciting but, at the same time, is realistic and easily approachable. On the other hand, Charlotte’s potential thus could not be fully developed in this novel and her poetic dramatic style which made her famous later is completely missing in *The Professor*.

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<sup>143</sup> Brontë, *The Professor*, 12.

<sup>144</sup> Stevie Davies, “Three distinct and unconnected tales: The Professor, Agnes Grey and Wuthering Heights” in *The Cambridge companion to the Brontës*, ed. Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 76.

### 7.3. Themes

Although the novel differs in style and complexity from her remaining books, the themes Brontë employed in *The Professor* are to be found and revisited in *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley* and *Villette*. Even in her juvenilia, Charlotte tended to return to certain themes and patterns some of which she later explored in her published novels. These include, among others, search for independence, religion, marriage, equality in both gender and social position, self-awareness, education, loneliness and isolation or nationalism. The most prominent themes of *The Professor* are touched upon in the following sub-chapters.

#### 7.3.1. Religion and nationalism

Religion is one of the recurring themes in Charlotte Brontë's novels. Her strong Christian beliefs are not surprising considering she grew up as a parson's daughter partially raised by her Calvinist aunt. As a Protestant, Charlotte often manifests her distaste towards Catholicism. This is very much apparent in *The Professor* where her protagonist travels to the continent to stay in Catholic Belgium. Here he meets the Flamander, natives to the country, who per Crimsworth perception "gave the tone to the establishment, and that tone was rough, boisterous, masked by a point-blank disregard of all forbearance towards each other or their teachers. [...] I know nothing of the arcana of the Roman Catholic religion, and I am not a bigot in matters of theology, but I suspect the root of this precocious impurity, so obvious, so general in Popish countries, is to be found in the discipline, if not the doctrines of the Church of Rome"<sup>145</sup>.

From this excerpt, it is apparent that in *The Professor*, Charlotte's religious attitudes are connected to the theme of nationalism – as a teacher, William Crimsworth gets to meet pupils not only of Flemish and Belgian origin, but of various nationalities of Catholic countries and he is not very polite in their descriptions – the German girl Aurelia Koslow is described to be of 'Tartar features, deplorably ignorant, slovenly and dirty'; Belgian girl Adèle is per Crimsworth 'unnatural looking being of massive shape' with 'envy and panther-like deceit about her mouth'; Juanna Trista, a girl of mixed Belgian and Spanish is thought by William to have 'the precisely same shape of skull as

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<sup>145</sup> Brontë, *The Professor*, 99.

Pope Alexander the Sixth' and 'she made noises with her mouth like a horse, she ejected saliva, uttered brutal expressions'; then there were 'very vulgar, inferior-looking Flamanders' showing 'imbecility of intellect'.<sup>146</sup> Even in cases Crimsworth is able to find something positive about his foreign students, his remarks are often accompanied by some comment criticizing the Catholic religion like: "Sylvie was gentle in manners, intelligent in mind; she was sincere, as far as her religion would permit her to be so..."<sup>147</sup>.

In the school William Crimsworth works in, there are also pupils from England, and when the narrator is describing these girls, his tone changes dramatically when he compares them with the remaining girls from the Catholic countries:

...I could at a glance distinguish the daughter of Albion and nursling of Protestantism from the foster-child of Rome, the *protégée* of Jesuitry: proud, too, was the aspect of these British girls; at once envied and ridiculed by their continental associates, they warded off insult with austere civility, and met hate with mute disdain, they eschewed company-keeping, and in the midst of numbers seemed to dwell isolated.<sup>148</sup>.

The isolation in the world of different religion with different values is the theme Charlotte later explores more thoroughly in her novel *Villette*, however, it is also touched upon in *The Professor* although it slightly loses its weight as it is so explicitly connected with the nationalism and criticism of the Roman Catholic Church in contrast with the praise of the Protestantism. The tone of the narrative therefore seems much more negative and sometimes even racist. Although Charlotte never really gave up on these ideas in her future novels where she also dedicates many passages to the criticism of different religion, she started to do so in a slightly different manner focusing on the emotional level of her characters and their alienation while at the same time, she started to question religion in general, finding flaws even in her own Protestant beliefs.

### **7.3.2. Social identity, search for independence and gender issues**

The whole story concentrates on the lonely journey of its main protagonist William Crimsworth towards gaining financial independence and social status as well as

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<sup>146</sup> Brontë, *The Professor*, 101-102. See Glen, *The Cambridge companion to the Brontës*, 74-75.

<sup>147</sup> Brontë, *The Professor*, 103.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid*, 105.

searching for his own identity. He feels enslaved by his way of life and he wants to break free by working hard to achieve independence and security. After leaving his position at his brother's mill, William therefore ventures out into the world to work his own way in life from the beginning.

Stevie Davies argues that starting from the peak by employing one's own abilities in order to pursue financial independence are major themes in not just Charlotte's novels but also in her life, especially when she was thinking about starting her own school, getting education in Belgium or when she got the idea to publish her and her sister's poems and novels.<sup>149</sup> Therefore, Charlotte was able to make her protagonist's efforts and his longing for financial security very realistic and relatable. However, it was only with her female protagonist she could explore these issues more thoroughly. As a male, William already had certain privileges and made his goals seem much easier to achieve. The dominance of his gender is especially apparent when he works as a teacher in the class full of young females. As a teacher in charge of the class, he gets in position to show his own superiority to a great number of females, which he did even when he fell for one of his students. In fact, the excerpt from the book below features his future wife – Frances Henri.

I saw the new pupil was puzzled at first with the novelty of the form and language; once or twice she looked at me with a sort of painful solicitude, as not comprehending at all what I meant; then she was not ready when the others were, she could not write her phrase so fast as they did; I would not help her, I went on relentless. She looked at me; her eye said most plainly, 'I cannot follow you.' I disregarded the appeal, and, carelessly leaning back in my chair, glancing from time to time with a nonchalant air out of the window, I dictated a little faster.<sup>150</sup>

Crimsworth's impulse to show his dominance before women became heightened and more evident after he got intimidated by his female boss of whose superior status he was well aware. The female director of the school, Mademoiselle Zoraïde Reuter engaged in a kind of game-playing with Crimsworth when she tried to discover 'where her mind was superior'<sup>151</sup> which he very much enjoys but at the same time loathes his socially inferior status as he develops romantic feelings for her. These feelings are of a

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<sup>149</sup> Stevie Davies, "Three distinct and unconnected tales: The Professor, Agnes Grey and Wuthering Heights," 72.

<sup>150</sup> Brontë, *The Professor*, 126.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

very passionate nature and awaken Crimsworth sexual needs which are symbolized by the fire which Nestor sees as a metaphor of sexual appetite.<sup>152</sup>

However, after William finds out Zoraïde is betrothed to another, he begins to treat her with cold civility and distaste managing to show her that despite her higher social status, he is still above her in terms of gender. He finds a new love interest in one of his pupils – young and shy Frances Henri, who is the exact opposite of Reuter. Thus, William gets his revenge on Zoraïde by making her jealous and ultimately making her fall in love with him. This proves to be a great achievement for him, for despite the fact he leaves the school as he does not want to get in conflict with Zoraïde’s husband M. Pelet, he is able to get a new job as a professor at a college where he receives an extraordinarily high wage. Thus, he secures his financial independence, gets a respectable job and a good social position with it, and fathers a son with his young half-English wife who is at the same time obedient and meek but at the end we can get a glimpse of Charlotte’s female protagonists in her, when she agrees to marry Crimsworth only under the condition that she may continue to work as a teacher in order to lead an active life.

At the end of the book, France’s also demonstrates her dissatisfaction with the fact she earns much less money than her husband and she is determined to do better and work harder. Her ambition is to open her own school, which she eventually does (with her husband’s consent). In France’s relationship with William, we may trace a first piece of the pattern Charlotte creates when forming literary couples – as Stevie Davies states, Charlotte’s female characters show a strong feminist insistence to gain an equal professional status with their husbands while at the same time their men tend to be dominant (Frances calls William ‘monsieur’ justifying it by stating she is unable to pronounce “w”), passionate and arousing almost religious respect and devotion in their wives.<sup>153</sup> Though Charlotte made an attempt to portray a marriage of equality in *The Professor*, she succeeded to create a relationship based on mutuality and equality especially in *Jane Eyre*.<sup>154</sup>

Nevertheless, this last passage of the book in fact provides a smooth transition towards getting a female character in the central position of Charlotte’s next novels.

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<sup>152</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 46

<sup>153</sup> See Davies, “Three distinct and unconnected tales: The Professor, Agnes Grey and Wuthering Heights,” 74.

<sup>154</sup> See Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 35.

#### 7.4. Publication and critical reception

After the novel was nine times rejected by the publishers, Brontë went on to publish *Jane Eyre* and the first novel she wrote was published only two years after her death in 1857. The manuscript was discovered by Elizabeth Gaskell while she was working on her biography of Charlotte. Gaskell was initially afraid the novel might relate to Charlotte's relationship with Monsieur Héger and if it in fact did, there was a threat Héger himself could publish the letters Charlotte sent him in order to protect himself from accusations he was intimate with his students and that would basically destroy Gaskell's portrayal of Charlotte as an innocent, shy and angelic woman.<sup>155</sup> To her relief, the novel's hero did not bear any resemblance with Charlotte's Belgian tutor, although Gaskell still found the novel coarse and disagreeable.

The novel was eventually edited by Charlotte's husband Arthur Nicholls who ventured to tone down some of the language Charlotte used in the novel (such as changing 'God damn' to 'Confound') before having the book published. However, Elizabeth Gaskell did not find the changes Nicholls made sufficient, and in a letter she sent to the publisher George Smith, she expressed her desire for more thorough editing of the novel so that Charlotte's name would not be associated with any more coarseness than it already did.<sup>156</sup>

The novel itself did not receive very positive reviews as it was published only after Charlotte's masterpieces and compared to these, *The Professor* seemed to be of much less artistic value. It lacks the psychological analysis of the characters – especially female characters striving for recognition, equality and love in the patriarchal world, i.e. something that became a "trademark" of Charlotte's work and made her a revolutionary of her times. *The Professor* is therefore often not included in studies on Charlotte Brontë or is given only a little space. The novel is, however, a valuable source of Brontë's professional beginnings and of how her work later developed and evolved. The novel she published as her last, *Villette*, is dealing with the same experience of Charlotte's – her stay in Brussel, and thus the comparison between her first and last novel may be performed on many different levels.

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<sup>155</sup> Miller, *The Brontë myth*, 66.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

## 8. Jane Eyre

This chapter is dedicated to Charlotte's most famous and best recognized novel which gained her an everlasting admiration among readers and critics from all over the world. The novel's title is *Jane Eyre* and its eponymous protagonist has up to this date been a symbol of female independence and strength. In the following sections of the thesis, I would like to focus on this novel in a greater detail – including its publication, structure, characters and themes while at the same time compare it with Charlotte's earlier novel *The Professor*.

### 8.1. Publication and critical reception

Even after experiencing disappointment from her first novel being nine times rejected, Charlotte decided not to abandon her idea to publish with the same enthusiasm as before the failure with *The Professor*. This may relate to the fact that the first novel was rejected with very generous comments, constructive criticism of pointing out why the story was rejected and encouraging Charlotte to consider that and submit a different novel.<sup>157</sup> She did precisely that and prepared a second novel for which she got inspiration from her childhood, school and working as a governess.

*Jane Eyre* was completed in August 1847 and immediately sent to the very same publishing company that rejected her first book with such helpful and encouraging comments - Smith, Elder and Company. The story was accepted right away and before the end of the year ran to two editions and became of the year's best sellers.<sup>158</sup> Charlotte was offered a £100 for the copyright and the first edition, published only six weeks later under the title *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography* edited by Currer Bell drawing on the fact the novel contains some autobiographical features and especially Victorian society's tradition of biographical writing which was very popular at that times.

Although the novels of her sisters were accepted at the time *The Professor* was rejected, Charlotte's second story got published even before *Agnes Grey* and *Wuthering Heights* proving how excited the publishers were by this novel. The head of the

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<sup>157</sup> Edwards, *Charlotte Brontë: The novels*, 198.

<sup>158</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 15.

publishing company, George Smith, even gave an account of how ‘engrossed’ he was with Charlotte’s story that he even cancelled his weekend plans preferring to spend the days by reading the book in his study.<sup>159</sup> And he was right to be excited as the novel became a classic of English literature admired by many generations of readers.

Even in its own time, *Jane Eyre* caused a sensation – the readers, including literary celebrities such as William Thackeray (who allegedly missed a deadline as he was so engrossed by Brontë’s novel) were amazed by its emotional honesty and passion.<sup>160</sup> Some readers and critics were, on the contrary shocked by the ‘coarseness’ and ‘horrid taste’ of using biblical allusions in the novel and Brontë accepted these negative reviews only with great difficulty. She was especially hurt after she read a bitter criticism of her work in the *Quarterly Review* where her novel was marked as an ‘unchristian’ and ‘morally disreputable’.<sup>161</sup>

Nevertheless, the novel was still a success. The publisher of Anne’s and Emily’s novels Newby even attempted to confuse the identity of the three Bells so that it looks like all three novels and even *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* Anne was preparing were written by the very same author, which naturally disquieted Charlotte’s publisher Smith and Elder – therefore, Charlotte and Anne (Emily refused to accompany them) went to London’s office of Charlotte’s publisher to prove the separate identities.<sup>162</sup>

## 8.2. Structure and narrative style

As Jill Matus points out, *Jane Eyre* beside autobiographical features also employs romance and quest narrative as well as fairy tale, gothic elements<sup>163</sup>, and the Bildungsroman while reflecting author’s familiarity with the Bible, Milton or Shakespeare.<sup>164</sup> Nestor adds that the fable-like nature of the novel portraying the personal pilgrimage of a female heroine struggling for survival and justice is in fact no less relatable to the women today than for women back in 1847 when the novel was

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<sup>159</sup> Miller, *The Brontë myth*, 12.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>161</sup> Andrew Hook and Judith Hook, “Introduction to Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*” in Brontë, *Shirley* (London: Penguin Books, 1974), 18.

<sup>162</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 15.

<sup>163</sup> Critics see the use of gothic elements in *Jane Eyre* to portray the internal state of mind to the external and as an example they often describe Rochester’s mysterious mad wife Bertha as Jane’s alter-ego. See Glen, *The Cambridge companion to the Brontës*, 111.

<sup>164</sup> Jill Matus, “Strong family likeness: *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 99.

published.<sup>165</sup> In the novel, Charlotte draws heavily on the Romantic traditions of individualism she grew up on by choosing a narrator in the form of a plain looking, orphaned governess she had so much in common with.<sup>166</sup> It was therefore the first novel in which Charlotte used a voice of a female narrator allowing herself to explore the depths of the female psyche in a much more realistic and relatable manner than she could in her first novel.

The book be divided five parts – Gateshead (the Reeds family), Lowood, Thornfield (Mr. Rochester), the Moor House (the Rivers family) and the reunion with Rochester. In both form and content, the novel joins simplicity with engaging storytelling skill. Nestor argues *Jane Eyre* is in fact Charlotte's most complete novel as it is manageable for the readers in ways her later novels *Shirley* and *Villette* are not.<sup>167</sup> Thus, it is only natural *Jane Eyre* remains to be the most popular novel of Charlotte's, despite the fact *Villette* is much praised for its narrative technique and complex story. However, none of Charlotte's other novels has the dynamics and drive of *Jane Eyre*.

The whole story is narrated retrospectively as Jane looks back as far as to her childhood. At the very beginning of the novel, we 'meet' an orphaned child named Jane living with her aunt and cousins. The opening scene of the novel introduces the narrator and provides some general information while making the reader to ask for more:

There was no possibility of taking a walk that day. We had been wandering, indeed, in the leafless shrubbery an hour in the morning; but since dinner (Mrs. Reed, when there was no company, dined early) the cold winter wind had brought with it clouds so sombre, and a rain so penetrating, that further out-door exercise, was now out of the question. I was glad of it: I never liked long walks, especially on chilly afternoons: dreadful to me was the coming home in the raw twilight, with nipped fingers and toes, and a heart saddened by the chidings of Bessie, the nurse, and humbled by the consciousness of my physical inferiority to Eliza, John, and Georgiana Reed.<sup>168</sup>

This is without any doubt not a very cheerful yet a very powerful beginning of the story as it briefly introduces all the characters of the first part of the book while setting the general tone of the novel by inciting melancholy and a sense of alienation, which gets even more evident as the first chapter unfolds:

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<sup>165</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 50.

<sup>166</sup> See Miller, *The Brontë myth*, 13.

<sup>167</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 50.

<sup>168</sup> Charlotte Brontë: *Jane Eyre* (London: Harper Press, 2010), 1.

The said Eliza, John and Georgiana were now clustered round their mama in the drawing-room: she lay reclined on a sofa by the fireside, and with her darlings about her (for the time neither quarrelling nor crying) looked perfectly happy. Me, she had dispensed from joining the group; saying, ‘She regretted to be under the necessity of keeping me at a distance [...]’.<sup>169</sup>

In a very short time, Charlotte succeeds in making the reader feel for young Jane and relate with her misery. Readers are thus invited to the journey of Jane’s life going with her thru the traumatic childhood full of violence and injustice. The beginning of *Jane Eyre* is often believed to be the most powerful in its urgency and imaginative style full of symbolism and fulfils the role the introduction of a novel should – it engages readers and invites them to join the main protagonist in her journey filled with both tragedy and joy.

As already stated above, this journey starts with Jane living with her aunt and cousins at Gateshead, she is then sent to the school at Lowood which bears a striking resemblance to Charlotte’s real first school experience at Cowan Bridge. From the school, we follow Charlotte to her first position as a governess at Thornfield hall where she gets to meet the mysterious Mr. Rochester she falls in love with. However, although Jane gets her moment of happiness when Rochester assures her their feelings are mutual and proposes to her, it is obvious that something is not quite right as their wedding is carried out in haste and the feeling is quickly confirmed as the ceremony is interrupted and we find out Rochester is already married and his insane wife is locked up in the attic of Rochester’s estate. Jane, though deeply in love with her master, manifests her self-respect by refusing to live with Rochester as his mistress and leaves the Thornfield Hall. She then wanders, lost and starving through the windy moors and gets rescued by the Rivers family – St. John, Diana and Mary, who are later discovered to be her relatives. After regaining her strength, she secures a job as a teacher in a village school and moves into her own cottage. Jane also finds out she inherited a considerable sum of money from her diseased uncle and thus finds herself in a position previously unknown to her – surrounded by loving family and being financially secured. However, she still misses Rochester and refuses to marry her cousin St. John and go with him as missionaries to India as she simply does not love him and cannot imagine her life spent with someone she has no passionate feelings for. After that, Jane feels like she hears

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<sup>169</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 1.

Mr. Rochester calling her name from a great distance and she decides to return to him. She learns his mad wife Bertha set the Thornfield Hall in fire and died while her husband lost his arm and sight in attempt to rescue her from the flames. Jane and Rochester are then married as equals and have a son together. The day their child is born, Rochester's sight is healed and he can see again.

Though the story in its nature is very simple and may remind the readers of many other 'Cinderella' stories, its power is mainly in Charlotte's ability to explore the social issues and mainly female issues of her times some of which are still relatable even today. Many a woman may still find herself in the heroine who does her best not to lose control over her emotions while interacting with others, repressing the passions and desires while following her moral code and values. In essence, the structure of the story resembles the one of *The Professor* – an orphan venturing into the unknown world to find independence and love while at the same time forming his individuality. The story of Jane itself, however, is narrated more dramatically and sensationally and the struggle of the central character to break free from the prison of conventionalities and repression is thus more pressing and is reaching closer to the audience.

### **8.3. Themes**

In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte develops many themes she previously explored in *The Professor*, such as education, search for independence, marriage, gender issues, feelings of loneliness and alienation, family and others. In her second novel, however, Charlotte makes a better use of placing a female character in the centre of the story which makes it possible for her to explore the themes in a more personal and relatable manner.

#### **8.3.1. Childhood and family**

Unlike in *The Professor*, the readers are introduced to the narrator and the main protagonist of the novel when she is just a ten-years-old child. This is a very important feature of the book as the child narrator makes it possible for Charlotte to explore a topic very close to her – the utmost importance of the childhood experience and how it forms human individuality.

Jane Eyre's childhood is a very complicated one, as it is marked by traumatic

events. As an orphan, she lives with her aunt Mrs. Reed and her cousins, and does not receive any positive feelings from them. Her aunt does not care for Jane at all and therefore, the young girl is quite alone and enjoys herself the most when reading a book in a window-seat hidden by the red curtain where she creates a world of her own – protected by the curtain from the unfriendliness and hate on one side and the nature behind the window on the other.<sup>170</sup>

Even Bessie, Reeds' servant and nurse, who is the closest to mother for Jane, still perceives her to be a strange child and thus does not show her any loving affection. In return, Jane has no love neither for her aunt and cousins, nor for Bessie, whose 'chidings' make her unhappy.<sup>171</sup> Though the nurse is taking care of Jane, she still lacks proper upbringing and there are no role models for her to show her what is right and what is wrong so she is basically growing up on her own, raising up herself especially through reading and observing the world around her, while suppressing her inner feelings.

Jane's childhood experience in general is very negative and unpleasant. Per Freud who takes deep interest in the formative aspects of childhood states that "in order to fend off certain unpleasurable excitations arising from within, the ego can use no other methods than those which it uses against unpleasure coming from without, and this is the starting point of important pathological disturbances."<sup>172</sup> These disturbances together with her torn identity are perceived by Jane's surroundings and therefore almost everybody finds her "naughty and tiresome, sullen and sneaking"<sup>173</sup>, this 'strange child' nobody understands and can attach to.

Lack of real parents, feeling of insignificance and injustice makes Jane's childhood a traumatic experience, the climax of which is her "imprisonment" in the red room after she hits her bullying cousin John Reed, who is in fact the only male character she continually encounters. The memory of this scary chamber haunts Jane even in her adulthood, when it returns to her in the form of nightmares bringing back the unhappy moments of her stay in Gateshead. However, even in her childhood, Jane had some notion of her own self as she was up to this point able to suppress her inner self and maybe because she was so alone it seemed natural for her to act "invisibly", which is

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<sup>170</sup> See Edwards, *Charlotte Brontë: The novels*, 10.

<sup>171</sup> Edwards, *Charlotte Brontë: The novels*, 6.

<sup>172</sup> Sigmund Freud: *Civilization and its discontents*, trans. James Strachney (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc, 1962), 15.

<sup>173</sup> Brontë. *Jane Eyre*. 10.

not very common for a child. This notion is also supported by Jane's view of death which is described in the following chapter.

### 8.3.1. Death

In her novels, Charlotte often deals with the theme of death. In *Jane Eyre*, the character's attitude towards this phenomenon is even more interesting as it develops and changes throughout the book. Being an orphan since early childhood, ten-years-old Jane is very much aware of death and has her opinions on the afterlife and supernatural elements connected with death. When Mr. Lloyd asks Jane what made her ill after her iconic time spent at the 'haunted' red room, she replies: 'I was shut up in a room where there is a ghost, till after dark,' which is followed by Lloyd's question whether she is afraid of ghost, Jane states she is afraid of the particular ghost of Mr. Reed as 'he died in that room, and was laid out there'.<sup>174</sup> When later Mr. Brocklehurst arrives at Gateshead to take a look at Jane who is to become a pupil in his school, they engage in a conversation about hell:

'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 for ever?'

'No, sir.'

'What must you do to avoid it?'

I deliberated a moment; my answer, when it did come, was objectionable. 'I must keep in good health, and not die.'<sup>175</sup>

Mullen argues, Jane's childish view on the topic of death shows how limited and wrongly tutored her spiritual intelligence is and it is only when she meets young and deeply religious Helen Burns at Lowood and converses with her about God when Jane's mind tries to comprehend the meaning of life and what lies beyond.<sup>176</sup> When Helen dies, Jane's mind sinks in thoughts and fears of death and she starts to think about her future.

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<sup>174</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 18.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>176</sup> Mullen, "Charlotte Brontë: Insurrection and Resurrection," 443.

Jane's journey after she leaves the school to work as a governess is marked by her ever-growing realization of death as she both fears it and, at some point, even wishes to die before she awakens hope in herself and finally finds solace in her religious beliefs and comes to the conclusion her life is valuable and God did not give it to her just to throw it away.<sup>177</sup> Only then Jane manifest her pure understanding of life as she starts focusing on the present and the life she was given. In effect, she is a survivor, a strong woman who fights for her life against the entire world.

### 8.3.2. Education – Lowood and teaching

Similarly as in *The Professor*, Charlotte explores the theme of education also in *Jane Eyre*. However, she draws on a different experience of her own as she goes back to her childhood to the Cowan Bridge school which was the main inspiration for the Lowood school for Charlotte. In the novel, Charlotte criticizes the condition of the school and the methods of some of the teachers, reliving traumatic moments from her childhood when she saw her older sisters die from illness they caught in the school. She thus provides a powerful testimony of schooling in her times.

Nevertheless, Jane proves herself to be an intelligent middle-class student for whom teaching seems to be the only acceptable way of earning money for living. Teaching was in fact the only job suitable for women of various classes as the position of a governess or teacher provides the possibility of both rising and sinking.<sup>178</sup> Jane therefore takes the chance of becoming a governess after a short experience of teaching in the school in which she was a pupil.

Just like Charlotte herself, Jane (and later also Lucy in *Villette*) is excited about learning but is not very keen on teaching - she does not enjoy her duties as a governess and longs for something different in her life. Once she inherits the money from her uncle, she immediately stops working as a teacher as she no longer need perform a job she hates to earn money. Devine even argues that when Jane heard Rochester calling for her, she deliberately went to him to live a life of sin as she could not have known his wife was dead – and that is something that would not have been possible for Jane had she not inherited the money as otherwise she would place herself in a very vulnerable

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<sup>177</sup> Mullen, "Charlotte Brontë: Insurrection and Resurrection," 443.

<sup>178</sup> Devine, "Spectral Strangers: Charlotte Brontë's teachers," 386.

position as the only source of money for Jane was actually the teaching, which was a job only available to women of a good reputation and therefore would not be a possibility for her in case Rochester would leave her.<sup>179</sup> This theory places a different light on the novel, portraying Jane as a more calculative character who thinks extensively about her possibilities and weights her life chances.

### **8.3.3 Gender issues, love, marriage and equality**

*Jane Eyre* is often described as a feminist novel due to its extensive focus on gender issues. Through the eyes of a female first person narrator, Brontë provides an insightful testimony of how women of her times have to fight for equality and recognition in the oppressive patriarchal world. Throughout the novel, Jane confronts various kinds of repression which was familiar to many Victorian women who could thus relate closely to the main protagonist.<sup>180</sup>

The outward repression is, however, not the only one Jane deals with. As a woman, she is expected to behave in a certain way – she should be obedient, dutiful and meek and as expressing any other side of her personality would be perceived as inappropriate and coarse. Therefore, she tries to repress her own passionate emotions since her early childhood. In the course of the novel, she learns to control her feelings and tame her inner passions which proves to be a very difficult task as she encounters violence, humiliation and eventually consuming love. In the beginning, when Jane is still a child terrorized by her cousin John who punishes her for reading a book, her inexperienced inner-self rebels against the injustice she is facing. Nestor claims that by this scene Brontë alarmed many contemporary critics as she portrayed ‘the dangerous power of reading’.<sup>181</sup>

As a child, Jane meets her other oppressor and the main villain of the novel – Mr. Brocklehurst who is the true representation of male superiority and tyranny who, as a head-master of a school for girls demonstrates his powers by humiliating and terrorizing both the pupils and the female teachers. However, Jane’s traumatic stay at the school of Lowood is softened by emotional friendship she finds there – when Jane first arrives at Lowood and suffers from cold and hunger and fears for her own life, she

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<sup>179</sup> Devine, “Spectral Strangers: Charlotte Brontë’s teachers,” 387.

<sup>180</sup> See Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 54.

<sup>181</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 52.

is helped by a kind teacher, Miss Temple and a young pupil Helen Burns who show Jane how women can fight oppression through love, trust and cooperation. This newly discovered notion helps Jane get through eight years in Lowood which are marked by the emotional death of Helen.

When she leaves the school to become a governess in a private household, Jane finds herself once again alone in the unknown world and she does not know what to expect. After arriving at Thornfield Hall where she is to stay to be a governess of a young Adèle, the *protégé* (and most probably a daughter) of Mr. Rochester who is not yet present in the house, she goes out for a walk, where she first encounters her future love interest. Though she does not know the man who she meets is Mr. Rochester, their initial meeting immediately shows the dynamic of their future relationship. Davis observes that in this scene, Jane is both compliant and resistant and Rochester is both abrupt and attentive while he questions Jane who dutifully answers and responds with scrutiny when being scrutinized and given orders some of which she obeys and some of which she counters.<sup>182</sup>

Though Edward Rochester is Jane's master and therefore in a superior position towards her, their relationship is based on growing friendship. For Jane, Rochester is basically the only one she can have intellectual conversation with, during which they mutually challenge each other. Rochester is intrigued by Jane's intelligence and her boldness as, although she is an obedient employee she is also not afraid to state her opinions in front of him and she does not see any reason why should she – she is, after all 'a free human being with an independent will'<sup>183</sup>. Throughout their encounters, Jane is beginning to fall for her master, as for Rochester, readers do not know how he feels as they see through Jane's eyes and she in fact only hopes for love but does not truly believe it can happen, her emotions are raging inside of her, she longs for love and passion which seem unreachable for her – all the more when Miss Ingram comes to stage and Rochester claims she is his future bride. Jane is crushed by this information and is sure that after her master's wedding, she will have to leave Thornfield Hall forever. Rochester confirms this to her and informs her he has found a new situation for Jane in Ireland. At the same time, however, he gives a speech finally unveiling what is the nature of his feelings for Jane:

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<sup>182</sup> Mary Ann Davis, Mary Ann, "On the Extreme Brink" with Charlotte Brontë: Revisiting Jane Eyre's Erotics of Power," *Papers on Language* 52(2) (2016): 115-148, accessed April 2, 2017, ISSN 00311294.

<sup>183</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 256.

I sometimes have a queer feeling with regard to you – especially when you are near me, as now: it is as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame. And if that boisterous channel, and two hundred miles or so of land come broad between us, I am afraid that cord of communication will be snapt; and then I've a nervous notion I should take to bleeding inwardly. As for you, - you'd forget me.<sup>184</sup>

Jane is perplexed but still believes Rochester is going to marry Miss Ingram and thus she could not possibly stay near him, verbalizing her feelings for her master. At this point, she gives perhaps the most quoted speech of the entire novel – speech through which Brontë gave voice to women as she shows that women have the same feelings as men which makes them equal as human beings:

Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automaton? – a machine without feelings? And can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips, and my drop of living water dashed from my cup? Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! – I have as much soul as you, –and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty, and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you right now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, or even mortal flesh: – it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal, – as we are!<sup>185</sup>

Edward Rochester, quite revolutionarily acknowledges their equality – revolutionarily not just because Jane is a female but at the same time his servant and a poor girl without any status in society. In the standards of Victorian society, Jane is practically nobody, an invisible governess. Rochester, however, got to know Jane as a person and thus recognized her qualities making her equal in his eyes, he even explains to Jane (and to readers), why he sees Jane as his equal and how he never met a woman so daring as her:

I never met your likeness. Jane: you please me, and you master me – you seem to submit, and I like the sense of pliancy you impart; and while I am twining the soft, silken skein round my finger, it sends a thrill up my arm to my heart. I am influenced – conquered; and the influence is sweeter than I can express; and the conquest I undergo has a witchery beyond any triumph I can win.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 254-255.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 255-256.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

He finally confirms his love and their equality in his final proposal when he says: ‘My bride is here, because my equal is here, and my likeness. Jane, will you marry me?’<sup>187</sup>

Jane now appears in a difficult situation – on one hand, she treasures the love she has for Edward Rochester and is delighted by the fact he loves her back; on the other hand, she is aware of her status (and is reminder of her inferiority by Mrs. Fairfax) and is worried about this inequality as she longs for an equal marriage. At the same time, Jane fears she would lose her independence in such marriage. Charlotte Brontë, wanted the equality between Jane and Edward to be absolutely complete and unconditional, and thus she separates the couple so that they can achieve this goal. After the revelation that Rochester is already married and proposes to Jane to become her mistress – which would not only put Jane in a much more inferior position but it would also bring her a great deal of insecurity – Jane refuses this offer out of self-respect and self-protection and leaves Thornfield Hall to find another situation. Per Anis, this capacity to take responsibility in difficult situation was in fact one of the most important features of the novel and it gained women the rights they wished for.<sup>188</sup>

Jane is then put to another test when St. John, her relative who saved her together with his sisters when she came both physically and psychologically broken to his house, asks her to marry him and go with him to India. This would be a great solution for Jane – she would have a purposeful employment as a missionary and would have the opportunity to travel and discover the world while having a respectable husband. She was in fact offered what Rochester could not give to her but for one thing - love. Thus, she could not possibly marry St. John as love was of equal importance for her and marriage without love was out of the question.

Eventually, Jane reunites with Rochester after she ‘hears’ him calling for her. She is now in a much more socially acceptable position after inheriting a large sum of money and on the contrary, Rochester’s superiority is decreased by the fact his house burnt down and he lost his arm and sight in the process. Now they truly are equal and mutually dependent. Moreover, Rochester’s wife passed in the fire and he can now marry Jane legally.

Charlotte Brontë thus succeeded in portraying an ultimately equal marriage with two people who found their way to each other against all odds and strict conventionalities of their times. She made this otherwise simple scenario more pressing

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<sup>187</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 257.

<sup>188</sup> Anis, “The Woman question in the novels by the Brontë sisters,” 24-25.

and relatable by applying moral dilemmas and the question of gender and equality which was ground-breaking in her times.

#### **8.4. Summary of similarities with *The Professor***

*The Professor* was rejected by the publishers mainly for not being dramatic and ‘decorative’ enough and for having a quite uninteresting narrator. Charlotte Brontë took this criticism to heart and wrote a book which fixed all these imperfections. Despite this, there are still many features *Jane Eyre* has in common with *The Professor*.

In terms of the form, structure and style of the novel, both novels share an autobiographical style of story-telling and are structured in a very similar way as the main protagonists leaves one place for another, unknown to them. Both novels are narrated by their main protagonists in retrospective and both share a great deal of Charlotte Brontë’s personal experience. In *Jane Eyre*, however, Brontë paid more attention to her characters’ development which added significantly to the dynamics of the whole story. The development of her psychological approach to her characters is striking and she also applied a much more poetic and likable style of writing making the difference between the least recognized and best-known novel of hers.

The protagonists of both novels are orphans who have to fight to survive in the world having no-one to depend on. Their journeys are marked with tragedies and traumatic experience but in return for their struggles, they are both rewarded by finding the loves of their lives and achieving social equality and, in *The Professor* also professional success.

Throughout her professional career, Charlotte Brontë kept returning to certain themes in her novels. In *The Professor* as well as in *Jane Eyre*, she explores the topic of gender issue, equality, self-fulfilment, religion, education or search for independence. In her second novel, Brontë had a chance to explore the theme of gender issue in a more relatable and realistic way as she put a female character in the centre of the story and could thus make a better use of her own emotional experience. Though the marriage in both novels is based on love and equality, Jane’s relationship with Rochester was evolving in the course of the novel and was directed towards reaching equal status since its beginning – in *The Professor*, the relationship of William Crimsworth and Frances Henri is basically ‘in charge’ of the male protagonist right until their marriage when

Frances expresses her ambitions and William does not object. Ultimately, the couple Brontë created in her second novel seems to be equal on more levels of life.

## 9. Shirley

This chapter is dedicated to Brontë's most distinctive novel – *Shirley*. The novel stands out from the work of Charlotte Brontë especially due to its differences from her other novels – it differs significantly in the structure, narrative style, setting, characters and general tone. It is also the only novel explicitly touching upon the political issues of the times and is therefore often categorized as a social novel. At the same time, readers may still find some of the themes so typical for the work of Brontë. For all these reasons, *Shirley* provides an interesting insight of the development of Charlotte Brontë as a writer.

### 9.1. Context of writing and publication

Brontë started to work on her next novel, titled *Shirley*, immediately after her previous novel *Jane Eyre* got published in 1847. Originally, she meant to convince her publishers to accept a new, revised version of her *The Professor* but as she failed to do so, she began working on a new novel – *Shirley*.<sup>189</sup>

The joy from the success of *Jane Eyre* was, however, soon interrupted – first by the death of her brother Branwell, then by the deaths of both her sisters Emily and Anne. The first volume out of three was almost completed when Branwell died, however, as Emily fell ill soon after, Charlotte interrupted her writing – this was in autumn 1848. Brontë did not come back to her novel until spring of the following year, after the death of her last surviving sister Anne, well aware that continuing to write after such a long break filled with tragic events would be difficult – she expressed her worries in a letter sent to her publishers: “I am glad that you and Mr. Smith like the commencement of my present work. I wish it were *more than a commencement*; for how it will be reunited after the long break, or how it can gather force of flow when the

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<sup>189</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 69.

current has been checked or rather drawn off so long, I know not.”<sup>190</sup>. Despite her fears, Brontë was determined to get back to writing as she believed it to be the best cure for her grief.<sup>191</sup>

When she resumed her writing, however, the tone of the novel changed – beginning with satire it, in the course of the story, changed into a dark and depressing excursion into the lives and minds of the heroes – especially Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar. The pain the author transformed into the novel is most evident in chapter ‘Valley of the Shadow of Death’ in the second half of the novel. In this part of the book, readers can also notice the author shifts her focus to the character of Shirley Keeldar, who was in fact based on Emily Brontë.

At the same time, Brontë felt the pressure from the public – after the success of *Jane Eyre*, there was a wild discussion about these mysterious authors as well as great expectations for the next books produced by the now famous writer.<sup>192</sup> Her true identity was also slowly breaking through and in Haworth, people soon started to realize Currer Bell was in fact Charlotte Brontë. Though *Jane Eyre* became a best-seller, it was not spare of criticism of its excessive use of romance and fairy-tale inspired story. On one hand, Brontë dismissed such criticism and defended her novel but at the same time wanted her work and herself to be accepted and took some of the criticism to her heart when writing *Shirley*.

Brontë then worked hard and succeeded in completing the novel which was published in October 1849. When *Shirley* first appeared, it was received quite well by the readers but not so well by the contemporary critics and her social-novel experiment was perceived as ‘ill-considered misdirecting of its author’s talents’<sup>193</sup> due to the fact Brontë paid more attention to political and historical questions than in her previous novel, when her talents laid her ability to explore human psychology and relationships. It does not mean, however, these areas are not included in *Shirley* at all – on the contrary, Brontë gives significant space to diving into the minds of her characters, only the circumstances, setting and narrative style differ greatly from her remaining works.

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<sup>190</sup> Hook Andrew and Judith, “Introduction to *Shirley*,” 12.

<sup>191</sup> Miller, *The Brontë myth*, 174.

<sup>192</sup> Glen, *The Cambridge companion to the Brontës*, 122.

<sup>193</sup> Hook Andrew and Judith, “Introduction to *Shirley*,” 7.

## 9.2. Structure and narrative style

The structure of the novel seems at first somewhat confusing. Owing to the fact the writing of the novel was interrupted for a considerable time and Brontë fell in a significantly different state of mind, the novel's structure lacks unity. The introductory part suggests the slow and conversational pace of the novel and its focus on the 'state of England issues', the tone is very satirical and critical. In the first paragraph of the novel, the narrator states:

If you think, from this prelude, that anything like a romance is preparing for you, reader, you were never more mistaken. Do you expect passion, and stimulus, and melodrama? Calm your expectations; reduce them to a lowly standard. Something real, cool, and solid, lies before you; something unromantic as Monday morning, when all who have to work wake with the consciousness that they must rise and betake themselves thereto.<sup>194</sup>

Yet, though Brontë gives considerable attention to politics and history in the novel, it is definitely not without romance, passion or melodrama – these are, in fact, one of the central elements of the novel. This all suggests that Brontë changed her mind during the writing process – or, as Judith and Andrew Hook suggests in their introduction for the novel, Charlotte never really made up her mind as to what she wanted to write about and what should be the primary focus of the novel as she wanders between describing social aspects, Luddite movement, characters' psychology and love story.<sup>195</sup> It is true that the central topic often changes and the flow of the novel is very inconsistent, however, the transition from the 'social to personal', though not too smooth, is not as clumsy as Hooks suggest. Brontë shifts her attention from general to more specific and eventually, she manages to put these two approaches in context when the historical and social points supplement the personal stories of the characters whose actions are thus made more understandable.

In *Shirley*, Brontë portrayed love stories in an entirely unromantic environment. This may have been Brontë's intention from the very beginning and the introduction may only serve as a satirical standing point of the narrator. Nestor even argues that these shortcomings which may at first seem to degrade the quality of the novel, in fact, make *Shirley* the most though-provoking novel and reveal the development of Charlotte

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<sup>194</sup> Charlotte Brontë: *Shirley* (London: Penguin Books, 1974), 39.

<sup>195</sup> Hook Andrew and Judith, "Introduction to *Shirley*," 10.

Brontë both as a writer and as a woman.<sup>196</sup>

This ‘genre inconsistency’ is, however, not the only way in which the structure of the novel shows some problems. *Shirley* first presents the character of Caroline Helstone as the unifying point of the story and the central dominating character. However, in the second half of the novel, this role is transferred to the character of Shirley, who is an entirely different person in terms of basically everything – social status, personality and opinions. When in *Jane Eyre* or *Villette* the opposing characteristics were merged in one character of Jane or Lucy respectively, showing the clash of morals and passion, in *Shirley* we get two separate characters. This shift from one character to another happened, as previously mentioned, when Brontë returned to writing after her three siblings died. At this point, the attention is considerably shifted to the character of Shirley, who was based on her deceased sister Emily. Though this change caused some narrative inconsistencies, it also made it possible for Brontë to explicitly contrast two entirely different characters and to explore these differences caused mainly by their different social status in a greater detail.

As hinted above, the narrative style of the novel is entirely different from that of any other book published by Charlotte Brontë. The first-person narrator is replaced by an omniscient third-person narrator who is, per Edwards, hard to be distinguished from the author herself as it voices her political opinions.<sup>197</sup> In the novel, Brontë ventured to detach her emotional self from the story and her aim was to create something different from a woman’s autobiography. She thus exchanged the direct and deeply personal female voice for a detached and knowing third-person voice which seems more ‘masculine’.<sup>198</sup>

### 9.3. Themes

In *Shirley*, Brontë revisits some of the themes she previously explored in *Jane Eyre* and *The Professor*. Some of these include the gender issue, getting on in the world, family issues or loneliness. However, in her second published novel, Brontë introduces some new themes exclusive only to *Shirley*. As she tries to take on a more political view through the third person narrator, Charlotte Brontë ventures on to explore themes like

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<sup>196</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 68.

<sup>197</sup> Edwards, *Charlotte Brontë: The Novels*, 18.

<sup>198</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 69.

the state of church and religion, state of England in the times of the Luddite movement and the hardships connected with it. From the novel, readers may get a better idea of what were Brontë's views of society in a broader sense. Though she was later criticized for changing her style in favour of such themes while turning away from the personal issues she so masterfully portrayed in her other novels, *Shirley* is a valuable source for identifying Brontë's development in both professional and personal way. It is also true that the question of gender issues raised previously in *Jane Eyre* and *The Professor* is even more prominent in *Shirley* owing to Brontë's more general view of the problem in Victorian society in addition to exploration of her heroines' inner struggles.

In general, the thematic outline of the novel is just as inconsistent as its structure – there are many incoherent themes and it is not so clear on the first sight what was author's message. Reading more thoroughly and knowing Brontë's other work, it may be argued that her primary aim was to portray lives of different individuals in context of social attitudes and social forces and how these social elements affect and control their lives in various ways. Judith and Andrew Hook state that what Brontë in fact attempted to do in *Shirley* is very similar to her goals in her remaining work – she wanted to 'bring together the world of romantic hope and fulfilment, of passionate feeling and love, and the real world of pain and suffering, moral and social duty and responsibility'<sup>199</sup>. In that respect, the ultimate theme of the novel is not that different from *Jane Eyre*, *The Professor* or *Villette* – however, the means Brontë tried to achieve to fulfil this theme is not the same as the 'world of pain and suffering' in her third written novel is more connected to the history and general social issues through which Brontë attempted to provide a better context for understanding her characters.

### 9.3.1. Church and religion

From the very introduction of the novel, it is evident that Brontë would pay a significant attention to the contemporary Church and religion along with the general portrayal of the state of England. In the introduction, the narrator watches the discussion of three curates while providing satirical comments. The story is set in the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century in Yorkshire and the narrator provides references to the present day in comparison.

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<sup>199</sup> Hook Andrew and Judith, "Introduction to *Shirley*," 18.

Brontë, though devoted believer, sees the flaws of the Church – its mismanagement, material decay and absence of clergy and in the novel, she calls for reformation.<sup>200</sup> She sees the issues both in her present time when there was an excess of curates, and in the years, in which the novel is set when there were but few though they were needed more than ever:

Of late years, I say, an abundant shower of curates has fallen upon the north of England: but in eighteen-hundred-eleven-twelve that affluent rain had not descended: curates were scarce then: there was no Pastoral Aid – no Additional Curates' Society to stretch a helping hand to worn-out old rectors and incumbents, and give them the wherewithal to pay a vigorous young colleague from Oxford or Cambridge.<sup>201</sup>

Of those few curates who were available in the North of England, the narrator argues there were not many who would make any difference and readily introduces the three young curates Mr. Donne, Mr. Malone and Mr. Sweeting who are then sarcastically described as follows:

These gentlemen are in the bloom of youth; they possess all the activity of that interesting age – an activity which their moping old vicars would fain turn into the channel of their pastoral duties, often expressing a wish to see it expended in a diligent superintendence of the schools, and in frequent visits to the sick of their respective parishes. But the youthful Levites feel this to be dull work; they prefer lavishing their energies on a course of proceeding, which, though to other eyes it appear more heavy with ennui, more cursed with monotony, than the toil of the weaver in his loom, seems to yield them an unfailling supply of enjoyment and occupation.<sup>202</sup>

By this description of the state of Church, Brontë shows the similarity with the Middle ages – showing the curates eating and drinking and enjoying their conversation while being served by a woman while people of their parishes were suffering from hunger and cold. Brontë expresses her disgust with the curates' theological conversation while comparing it with more favourable old-fashioned parsons and vicars who truly carry the burden of work in her parish.<sup>203</sup> This attitude is even clearer when she introduces Reverend Helstone who interrupts the discussion of these young clerks – in comparison

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<sup>200</sup> Ian Ward, "In search of healing voices: church and state in Charlotte Brontë's Shirley" *Journal of Church and State* 54(4) (2012): 603-624, accessed April 03, 2017, DOI: 10.1093/jcs/csr112. ISSN 0021969X.

<sup>201</sup> Brontë, *Shirley*, 39.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid*, 40.

<sup>203</sup> Glen, *The Cambridge companion to the Brontës*, 20.

with them, he is much older, clad in black and has an air of dignity and seriousness around him. However, Brontë also compares him to a ‘veteran officer’, pointing out the other extreme of the Church – its strict and unbending side. The ‘correct’ role of the Church in *Shirley* is represented only later by the character of Reverend Hall whose primary aim is to provide spiritual help and understanding to his flock in the times of need.<sup>204</sup> Reverend Hall is kind where Mr. Helstone is prudish and the young curates careless. He shows compassion and is willing to listen to anyone in need and that is exactly what Brontë believes Church should be like.

The satirical criticism of the Church is the most prominent element of the first chapter, however, it has in general not much connection to the remainder of the book – the characters of the curates reappear for bits but the satirical view on the contemporary state of the Church does not form an independent topic as Brontë shifts her focus on the general social and political aspect of the times. However, that does not mean she forsakes the theme of religion in the novel, on the contrary, its importance throughout the book is consistent. Brontë only takes a different approach, drops the satire, and calls for religious beliefs to reunite the distressed country and its people. She sees the need of reformation of the Church and even explicitly calls for it at the end of chapter 16:

Let England’s priests have their due: they are a faulty set in some respects, being only of common flesh and blood, like us all; but the land would be badly off without them: Britain would miss her church, if that church fell. God save it! God also reform it!<sup>205</sup>.

Brontë in fact never abandons her beliefs but she also does not hesitate to criticize what she sees as corrupt and wrong in the church and point out the need for change.

### **9.3.2. Condition of England – The Luddite movement**

The novel is set in the times of the Luddite movement – about 1811-12. To provide an accurate historical background, Brontë did her research, especially from reading the newspaper *Leeds Mercury* from these years. Brontë’s portrayal of the English society is therefore very accurate – she mentions a bad harvest which brought hunger to many people; she comments on the economic problems when government’s orders in Council caused economic issues for the merchants resulting in economic stagnation of the

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<sup>204</sup> See Ward, “In Search of Healing Voices: Church and State in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*,” 615.

<sup>205</sup> Brontë, *Shirley*, 298.

manufacturing areas and thus unemployment among the working-class; and she also points out how the country was politically divided as a Tory government was in favour of the war against Napoleon and thus appealing to the patriotism, loyalism and anti-republican feelings while the small Whig opposition stood by the manufacturing class and wanted to end the war and resume the trade.<sup>206</sup> We get all of this in the novel portrayed on the individual cases allowing to see how the people were affected by this political division. Brontë introduces the period as follows:

The period of which I write was an overshadowed one in British history, and especially in the history of the northern provinces. War was then at its height. Europe was all involved herein. England, if not weary, was worn with long resistance: yes, and half her people were weary too, and cried out for peace on any terms. National honour was become a mere empty name, of no value in the eyes of many, because their sight was dim with famine; and for a morsel of meat they would have sold their birth-right.<sup>207</sup>

Charlotte then in consequence pays further attention to the consequent Luddite movement. Luddites were mainly members of the working class who rioted against the growing industrialism and aimed to protect their interests by attacking mills and their owners and destroying machinery which they believed ‘took their bread from them’<sup>208</sup>. The mill of one of the characters in *Shirley* – Robert Moore, gets also attacked along with its owner.

These turbulent and violent times allowed Brontë to explore how such political issues affect individuals in different ways. The narrator of the book does not take sides – there is no right or wrong as the despair of the workers is given as much understanding as the hardships of being a manufacturer who tries to observe his business options. Brontë criticizes the state of England at those times in general, particularly the government not caring about the people, portraying how hard times influence lives of all the affected in a different manner. Brontë does not provide any solution, she describes the situation and provides opinions from all sides while these are all plausible. In effect, the historical setting mostly serves as a medium for portraying and justifying the actions of the novel’s heroes as what they do directly derives from the circumstances – Robert Moore despite being in love with Caroline prioritizes his family business and reputation and proposes to Shirley whose riches would save him, only later

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<sup>206</sup> Hook Andrew and Judith, “Introduction to *Shirley*,” 25.

<sup>207</sup> Brontë, *Shirley*, 62.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

to realize what is more important; Caroline suffering from idleness as she is forbidden to find an employment due to her social status; Shirley, who is rich and free to do as she likes despite being a woman and Louise, a tutor in an inferior position to his rich love interest Shirley. They all live in the difficult times when war rages abroad, riots in their home-land and they are bound by conventions and unfulfilled passions. Robert Moore is one of the characters whose development is the most prominent in the novel and the most connected to the theme of the Luddite movement. As a half-foreigner, he is yet to understand the region of Yorkshire and its people and their suffering. His views at the beginning of the novel are as follows:

Not being a native, nor for any length of a time a resident of the neighbourhood, he did not sufficiently care when the new inventions threw the old work-people out of employ: he never asked himself where those to whom he no longer paid weekly wages found daily bread; and in this negligence, he only resembled thousands besides, on whom the starving poor of Yorkshire seemed to have a closer claim.<sup>209</sup>

His journey from a selfish businessman to Romantic hero is of great importance in the novel – his approach is first justified by not being a native of the land, then by the difficulties of being a manufacturer who sees potential in progressive new methods. At the same time, however, he learns about the region, begins to understand and care and his character is ultimately transformed to that of a hero of the novel. His development, in fact, represents what Brontë sees as necessary to make a change in the society. The historical background is therefore an important element in the novel and while it provides an interesting insight to the times of Luddite movement, its main role is that it provides a crucial context for the development and actions of the central characters and their individual stories. Brontë's criticism thus stands on how the social and political state of England impacts and changes people's lives and how it often represents obstacles in reaching one's own happiness.

### **9.3.3. Feminism, love and friendship**

The theme of gender and friendship is one of the most typical for Brontë's novels and despite the significant difference of *Shirley* from the remaining three novels, it is included in this book as well. In fact, its prominence is in many ways even more

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<sup>209</sup> Brontë, *Shirley*, 61.

significant due to the fact Brontë views it in a broader social context and the theme of feminism is thus much more explicit – particularly on the case of Caroline Helstone. Caroline longs for employment and to feel useful and occupied but is denied to do so as the society does not allow it to financially secure middle-class women who have no existential need to look for employment. However, Brontë argues that it is the need of self-expression, meaning, fulfilment and use of one's talent what is important and refusing to allow this to middle-class women leads to ultimate feelings of idleness and despair. Caroline Helstone falls ill both physically and mentally as her passions both for occupation and love are not fulfilled.

The story of Caroline Helstone is one of the three main storylines of the novel (beside that of Robert Moore and Shirley Keeldar) and one that most resembles the storylines of Brontë's other novels. Caroline was abandoned by her mother when she was just a child (it is later revealed her mother left her as her child resembled the abusive father too much) and lives with her cold, stern uncle. Caroline is in fact the only character, whose emotions are explicitly portrayed and, readers are told exactly what she feels (in contrast with the remaining characters).

In the course of the book, Caroline interacts with other single woman of different ages and thus readers are presented with what was it like to be an unmarried woman at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For these women, there was no opportunity of self-fulfilment leading to denial of both self and emotional needs and passions.<sup>210</sup> This feeling is best represented by the fact Caroline eventually thinks of becoming a nun and thus suppressing her feelings for good while at the same time satisfying her need to find meaning of her very own existence. Since the very beginning, it is explicitly stated Caroline is in love with Robert Moore and is quite confused by the signs he gives her – once she is sure he feels the same as her, then she is not. The inner feelings of other prominent characters – Shirley, Robert and Louise are obscure to the reader until the very end. Due to her lack of occupation, Caroline's mind is focused on her love for Robert – in fact, she thinks of him almost all the time being consumed by the passion she is unable to express. She compares her emotions with what she thinks he feels and in her thoughts, it is demonstrated how her idleness clashes with an active life of her love interest:

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<sup>210</sup> Hook Andrew and Judith, "Introduction to Shirley," 31.

Different, indeed,' she concluded, 'is Robert's mental condition from mine: I think only of him; he has no room, no leisure to think of me. The feeling called love is and has been for two years the predominant emotion of my heart; and always there, always awake, always astir: quite other feelings absorb his reflections, and govern his faculties.<sup>211</sup>

Caroline thus concludes Robert has no time for love as he is too preoccupied with his work – and indeed, she could not be more right. It is eventually concluded that while he loved Caroline all the time, he saw it as a weakness turning him away from his duties and he fought to suppress his feelings in order to focus on his business and reputation. That is also why he proposes to Shirley, a rich heiress whose money would mean Moore and his mill would be secure forever. In his selfishness and ignorance, he is sure Shirley would accept him as he believes she is in love with him which shows his confidence and male superiority. However, Shirley is a representation of a strong, independent woman through whom Brontë argues that women, if given opportunity, are just as much capable of running a business and taking care of themselves as men are.

Shirley is the ultimate picture of the female power as her character combines strength and capability with compassion and understanding – features the male characters of Brontë's novels often lack and only gain them when their personalities are forced to develop through circumstances. And so, Robert Moore when being rejected is forced to feel humiliated not only for the rejection itself, but also for insulting Shirley by proposing to her without loving her and for betraying his own feelings for Caroline who he knows loves him deeply. Brontë thus once again shows female moral superiority – in a different manner than in *Jane Eyre* but with equal force.

Though Shirley's character is a picture of female strength and independence, Brontë states that even such free characters are, of course, also in need of friendship and love. Shirley keeps her governess near her despite her age and is delighted by the presence of Caroline whose company gives her life more cheerful side. Together, Shirley, Caroline and the governess Miss Pryor, who later reveals to Caroline she is in fact her long lost mother, form a world of their own separated from the 'male' world of industry, war and reason. In contrast, the women in the novel turn to nature, feelings and mutual compassion enjoying the time they get to spend together while longing for more. In this approach, Nestor sees Brontë's attempt to match the "male antagonism" by "female exclusiveness".<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Brontë, *Shirley*, 188.

<sup>212</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 74.

Nevertheless, the characters from these two separate worlds try to break these boundaries, be it intentionally or internally – Shirley as a rich investor penetrates the male world to which she brings her compassion as she sees the suffering of the working-class people being pushed out by machinery, and she tries to come up with a compromise; Robert Moore on the contrary tries to suppress his romantic side he sees as weak, in order to maintain his face and reputation – but he still appreciates the beauties of nature, enjoys his evening walks and tends for his little garden by his house. Brontë thus shows that the balance may be achieved only if these worlds are brought together and the emotions are combined with reason as happiness for both sides cannot be fully achieved while keeping these separate.

#### **9.4. Summary of similarities with *The Professor* and *Jane Eyre***

Brontë's third novel, *Shirley* stands out of her work as the most strikingly different. Its structure, narrative style and setting do not stand in line with the remaining novels. It is also, as the only novel, not directly based on Brontë's personal experience.

Despite these facts, there is still a lot *Shirley* shares with *The Professor* and *Jane Eyre*. The similarities are only harder to find as they are not so explicit. In terms of the story and characters, *Shirley* introduces more characters and their individual story-lines – however, all these characters are, just as William Crimsworth or Jane Eyre, on a path to reach their goals and develop. Caroline has to go through her 'valley of shadow and death' just like Jane whose experience of being lost and near death on the moors when leaving Rochester and both prove themselves to be the survivors realizing the value of their lives reawakened by finding family, and are ultimately rewarded by being united with their love interests. Robert Moore just as William Crimsworth ventures to achieve success in his profession, in order to build his reputation and secure his financial independence – both characters also face rejection from women only to be able to realize what is truly important and end up with the one they truly love. Shirley, a woman in possession of great wealth and independence values her freedom just like Jane and William and like-wise weighs her life chances and fears for losing her freedom in marriage.

There are also themes *Shirley* has in common with its predecessors – it gives attention to the question of religion and morals and, most significantly, to the woman

question and feminism by portraying lives of several different women facing issues of their society.

In *Shirley*, Brontë tried a different approach and style, but her story-telling and characters are still recognizable as part of her work and the differences she made only prove her own personal and professional development.

## 10. Villette

*Villette* is the last novel Brontë wrote before her death. Though it is known she was working on another novel, she did not get a chance to finish it as she died shortly after getting married to Arthur Nicholls. Therefore, *Villette* remains her last completed novel and the one most complex and critically acclaimed (though the most favourite of her novels among readers has always been *Jane Eyre*), being the last evidence of Brontë's development as a writer.

### 10.1. Context of writing and publication

Before Brontë started to work on her next novel, she attempted yet again to publish *The Professor*, this time with her own introduction. The book was rejected again and Charlotte never tried to publish it again angrily calling it her 'idiot child'.<sup>213</sup> She, however, refused to give up on the story-line she created in *The Professor* entirely and decided to put her Brussel experience to a new novel which was to become her last finished book – *Villette*.

When writing *Villette*, Brontë for the first time worked entirely alone – she had no sisters with whom she could consult the novel as she did with her previous works and the writing process was ever more difficult for her as is obvious from a letter she wrote to her publisher in October 1852 where she confesses: “I can hardly tell you how I hunger to have some opinion besides my own, and how I have sometimes desponded and almost despaired because there was no one to whom to read a line – or of whom to ask a counsel.”<sup>214</sup> It is impossible not to sense this feeling of loneliness, isolation and depression Brontë transferred to her last novel in a manner stronger than ever before.

At the same time, however, the identity of Currer Bell was completely revealed and Charlotte Brontë became an acknowledged and celebrated author. When she was writing *Villette*, she thus spent more time in London attending various cultural events and was finally earning enough money to be able to spend some for her own

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<sup>213</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 83.

<sup>214</sup> Glen, *The Cambridge companion to the Brontës*, 138.

enjoyment.<sup>215</sup>

Before the publication of the novel in 1853, Charlotte realized that its contents which presented the female psychology without any compromise, would not be well accepted among a certain kind of people, and therefore she asked her publisher to publish *Villette* anonymously.<sup>216</sup> This request was, of course, rejected and the novel was published under the famous pen-name Currer Bell which was already known to be Charlotte Brontë. Charlotte's worries were proved to be justified after the first reviews of *Villette* came to light. Harriet Martineau, also a well-known author and a friend of Charlotte's, took Brontë's request not to spare the novel in her review to her heart and she poured out a waterfall of criticism, calling the novel morbid, the protagonist's mentality unhealthy and her sexual desires unnatural for that of normal women - to this Brontë angrily responded that she saw nothing wrong about the fact single women have their passions and desires and that it is nothing to be ashamed of.<sup>217</sup>

Despite the fact Martineau, along with many other readers and critics, disliked the novel, it gained its recognition over time and eventually became acclaimed by many critics as Brontë's finest work.<sup>218</sup> Its structure and complex narrative style is well deserving of these appraisals and though *Villette* is not as dynamic and 'likeable' as Brontë's most famous novel *Jane Eyre*, it is in many ways superior to it.

## 10.2. Structure and narrative style

The structure and narrative style of Brontë's final novel marks her artistic development by its complexity, experimentalism and sophisticated style. Though Brontë gets back to first-person narrative and to her personal experience she has already applied in *The Professor*, she is also not afraid to experiment (despite the backlash she received for her experimentation in *Shirley*) and show the full strength of her literary development. Her use of an unreliable narrator is revolutionary in her times and Edwards argues that by using such a literary device, Brontë was, in fact, "looking forward to the more iconoclastic kinds of writing which have mirrored the disintegration of imperialist confidence in the early years of the twentieth century"<sup>219</sup>. It is true the novel was greatly

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<sup>215</sup> Glen, *The Cambridge companion to the Brontës*, 138.

<sup>216</sup> Miller, *The Brontë myth*, 51.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>218</sup> Edwards, *Charlotte Brontë: The novels*, 200.

<sup>219</sup> Edwards, *Charlotte Brontë: The novels*, 210.

appreciated among the modernists – for instance Virginia Woolf loved it. Hughes-Hallet also notices the innovative ‘stop-go’ rhythm of the novel “which is related to the supremacy of the imaginary realm over that of concrete reality”.<sup>220</sup>

Of all the Brontës’ novels, *Villette* is the most autobiographical as the author heavily draws on her Brussel experience described earlier in this thesis. Although Brontë literalized her experience in *The Professor*, it was only in her last novel she was fully able to develop her memories as she made her first-person narrator into a woman. The narrator, Lucy Snowe, is, however, not to be confused with the author – Lucy is more often seen as Brontë’s alter-ego, through which she could explore her inner passions and wild emotions. Lucy Snowe is, more importantly, a fictional character sharing some of her experience with the real life of its creator.

As a narrator, Lucy is, since the very beginning of the novel, very evasive – she takes the role of the observer who provides her own, often narrow, observations of her surroundings. It is clear she makes selections and does not tell everything, readers are made especially curious about her own character. Where Jane Eyre was expressive, trustworthy and open, Lucy is a sphinx who reveals her own self only very slowly, and her narrative is in general explicitly unreliable. In fact, we do not know her name until Chapter 2 when she herself provides it by her ‘I, Lucy Snowe...’<sup>221</sup>, the phrase is later used again in several cases, emitting the feeling of duality in the narrator’s character – she and her inner self.

In her narrative, Lucy is more preoccupied with describing what is happening around her and avoids providing some information about her own self. Through this careful and slow revealing of the main protagonist, Brontë succeeds in creating an enigmatic character, whose consciousness is very hard to explore – and the moments Lucy opens her mind to readers are then all the more rewarding.

During the story, it gets even clearer Lucy Snow is intentionally withholding information and is often deliberately vague. Her evasive story-telling thus obviously gets a role of an important literary device which is crucial for the entire narrative. Thus, readers are kept in tension as to what is actually going on, what is truth and what is yet to be revealed or what the narrator did not say at all. It takes Lucy a considerable number of pages before she admits she knew that Dr John and Graham Bretton were the

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<sup>220</sup> Lucy Hughs-Hallet, “Introduction to *Villette*,” in Brontë, *Villette* (London: Everyman's Publishers, 2000), xi.

<sup>221</sup> Charlotte Brontë: *Villette* (London: Everyman's Publishers, 2000), 12.

same character. As the pace of the novel is overall very slow, the style of narration is what keeps the audience interested and curious all the time. Nestor sees another important reason why Lucy Snow is so unreliable in her story-telling when she sees it as creating a 'self-protective façade' which is exactly what the contemporary society makes females do – to suppress their inner feelings deemed as inappropriate and create a more agreeable face for the public.<sup>222</sup>

It is also important to note that Lucy narrates the story as an elderly woman who describes her experience from when she was young. It is therefore not surprising her memory is flinching, she reshapes her story, selects, remembers something and forgets something else, and it is impossible to tell what is deliberately omitted and what is truly forgotten and buried in the depths of her mind over time. The symbol of burial reoccurs throughout the narrative, it suggests Lucy's secrets and her 'buried' self. The characters she describes often seem to appear and disappear like ghosts that return to Lucy only to go away again.

The story itself is mostly occupied by Lucy's experience, portraying a life of a plain woman on her path of discovering her own identity and seeking social and financial independence while trying to fit in the unjust society that provides neither compassion nor understanding. In this way, the story is quite like that of *Jane Eyre*. Its execution is, however, very different as Brontë chooses different devices and different characteristics to achieve her goals. Lucy lacks Jane's moral superiority and her journey is therefore ever more difficult for her as she loses her fight with her passions and desires and the repression from both herself and society falls heavily on her. Where Jane represents the ideal, Lucy stands for the common and plain. This, however, does not take away anything from her complexity and it is clear she is a woman of a very complicated character.

Lucy finds distraction in observing the lives of others and shares her observations and opinions in order not to focus on her own story. Readers are therefore introduced to various characters and their own stories – we get the story of Pauline who is the representation of what was perceived as the pure womanliness as she is beautiful, innocent, dutiful and obedient since her very childhood – everything Lucy Snowe is not; we are introduced to Graham Bretton and his mother, relatives to both Lucy and Pauline who, just like Pauline, later reappear in the novel even though Lucy at first fails to

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<sup>222</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 87.

reveal the identity of Graham who is in fact her first love interest but eventually gets married to pretty Pauline; likewise, we follow the story of vain Ginevra Fanshawe, Madame Beck or Monsieur Paul who in the end becomes Lucy's 'significant other'. Through the individual stories of these characters, readers are allowed to get a glimpse of Lucy's own personality. Just like Lucy, these characters are introduced continually as Brontë shows a new side of their personalities every time they appear, adding up to their 'ghost-like' quality. All these characters are described from Lucy's viewpoint and it depends only on her what she wants to reveal at the given moment. At the same time, Brontë also provides an insight into Lucy's own psyche and explores her neuroses and hidden side which she finds more interesting than focusing on her otherwise ordinary life.

In *Villette*, Brontë creates an entirely new style of her own, the structure and narrative of the novel are carefully constructed and thoughtful – perhaps because she was exploring her own experience and knew well how she wanted to present it, and that she wanted to make it as different from *The Professor* which proved to be a failure, as possible.

### **10.3. Themes**

In *Villette*, Brontë again revisits some of the themes previously used in her work. She gets back to the themes of isolation, religion, repression, searching for independence and finding one's own identity in difficult circumstances full of social obstacles in a world where justice does not exist. Brontë explores these themes with a new intensity with the help of different literary devices. This time, she goes even deeper into the mind of her protagonist which makes it possible for her to get to the raw emotions the heroine fights to repress as she does not fully understand them, but is aware of their inappropriateness and thus, she appears to be on a difficult path to embrace her own identity and find out who she really is. Lucy Snow is an unlikely hero but her plainness and confusion make the themes of the novel even more relatable to the readers.

### 10.3.1. Isolation

The theme of isolation is one of the most prominent in the novel. Where other characters of the novel have home and family, the main protagonist, Lucy Snowe, is all alone having nowhere to return to. Though she has a godmother with whom she lives at the beginning, and who is nothing but kind towards Lucy, the heroine of the novel does not feel like she belongs anywhere – she observes the relationships other characters create, their attachments towards each other but she herself stands as a solitary person who seems to be a stranger in every place she goes.

While the journey to Brussels was previously portrayed in *The Professor*, Lucy's isolation is even more obvious as she lacks Crimsworth male privileges. This contrast is evident when Lucy first arrives at Brussels – while she gets lost and frightened in an unknown world feeling her isolation more than ever before, Crimsworth, on the other hand, remains confident as he has with himself a letter of introduction and instructions. Nestor points out that Lucy's isolation contrasts with that of her male 'counterpart' in many ways as "where Lucy is repeatedly trapped and enclosed, Crimsworth finds release in long walks in the fresh air"<sup>223</sup>. The imprisonment Lucy endures everywhere she goes as she cannot break free heightens her feelings of loneliness and not belonging. She finds herself in an unknown world, surrounded by people whose religion is different from hers and whose language she cannot not speak nor understand. Her own language is a representation of what is known and dear to Lucy and, in a way, represents her home.

Could I but have spoken in my own tongue, I felt as if I might have gained a hearing; for, in the first place, though I knew I looked a poor creature, and in many respects actually was so, yet nature had given me a voice that could make itself heard, if lifted in excitement or deepened by emotion.<sup>224</sup>

Being unable to express herself in her own language isolated Lucy not only from others but also from her own self. Therefore, it is a consolation for Lucy when she is offered to teach English and getting the opportunity of finally 'being heard'.

However, even when Lucy finally gets reunited with her godmother and her son

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<sup>223</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 84.

<sup>224</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, 101.

in Brussels whose company she could enjoy, she again could not possibly find her way to fit-in entirely, her isolation prevailing due to her one-sided affection for Dr John (Graham Bretton). Thus, the company bestowed more painful feeling of separation as she found herself in a presence of a man who did not love her back – she had ‘friends, not professing vehement attachment, not offering the tender solace of well-matched and congenial relationship’<sup>225</sup>. Even when she attends public events with her ‘friends’, Lucy prefers to keep her distance, aware of her position and in a way enjoying her loneliness:

I rather liked to find myself silent, unknown, consequently unaccosted neighbour of the short petticoat and the sabot; and only the distant gazer at the silk robe, the velvet mantle, and the plumed chapeau. Amidst so much life and joy, too, is suited me to be alone – quite alone. Having neither wish nor power to force my way through a mass of close-packed, my station was on the farthest confines, where, indeed, I might hear, but could see little.

Lucy finally gets rid of her feeling of isolation only when she when she finds love at last – this time mutual – with Paul Emanuel, who encourages her to let go of her suppressed feelings and with whom she thus feels comfortable and free to reveal herself. Her destiny, however, is to stay alone as her love never returns from his travels because his ship is wrecked. Despite seeing his positive influence on Lucy, Nestor argues that Snowe’s life with Paul would not be an ideal fate for Lucy as his character was just as much liberating as it was repressive.<sup>226</sup> By depriving her heroine of a classical happy ending, Brontë achieves to portray a truly independent and successful woman who found her way to come in terms with her loneliness as a part of her identity.

### 10.3.2. Gender issues and repression

The theme of gender issues is one of the connecting elements of Brontë’s work. In each book, she explores a different side of the gender question in context with the characters’ personalities and the circumstances of their storylines. In *Villette*, Brontë portrays the issue from her own personal experience and in contrast with *Shirley* where the question of feminism drew on the broader social context, her last novel pays more attention to more private side of the issue and the repression connected with it. That does not mean

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<sup>225</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, 232.

<sup>226</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 96.

Brontë ceases to criticize the society as the source of this repression – she sees its basis in the conventionalities rooted in the society in which women are not encouraged to express neither their talents nor their inner feelings. Lucy Snowe is in fact forced to find employment in order to survive while before that she spent her life growing up as a typical middle class female of which she provides a metaphorical description:

...I will permit the reader to picture me, for the next eight years, as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather, in a harbour still as glass – the steersman stretched on the little deck, his face up to heaven, his eyes closed: buried, if you will, in a long prayer. A great many women and girls are supposed to pass their lives something in that fashion; why not I with the rest?<sup>227</sup>

Lucy Snowe is then thrown into the unknown world all alone and only then are we allowed to slowly uncover her inner self suffering from the repressive society. However, she does not fight primarily with her surroundings or patriarchy, the male character in *Villette* are not explicitly depicted as the villains who make use of their gender superiority as in *Jane Eyre*. Her primal struggle has a form of inner conflict between her outer, reasonable self and her inner passion she represses. When she asks herself: “But if I feel, may I *never* express?”<sup>228</sup> the ‘Reason’ readily answers “*Never!*”<sup>229</sup>.

As a single woman, Lucy is not allowed to express her sexual desires as it would be perceived as highly unfeminine. Brontë argues, however, that suppressing inner feelings is not natural and it can lead to a total mental collapse her heroine in fact experiences after refusing to embrace her feelings of passion and love. Miller states that such a breakdown of a female character was perceived by some contemporary readers as a “confirmation of the medical view that sexual frustration caused hysteria in morally weak spinsters”<sup>230</sup>. This opinion was common in the Victorian times and Nestor sees Lucy as a “true daughter of a society in which repression and disguise are necessary strategies for women striving to behave appropriately”<sup>231</sup>. In contrast, other female character are women of confidence and their status allows them to be more free in their actions – they know what they want and they go for it using their connections and capabilities in the process. They adapted to the world they live in, found a way to come

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<sup>227</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, 42.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>230</sup> Miller, *The Brontë myth*, 48.

<sup>231</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 86.

into terms with their gender with all its deficiencies but were at the same time, unlike Lucy, able to make use of their financial resources and position – thus, little Polly grows up into a beautiful and rich Paulina who is prepared to be a woman of Victorian expectations; Ginevra Fanshawe who calculates her life options and sees no issue in marrying a man for his wealth prioritizing position in society before love; and then there is also Madame Beck, a woman of great intelligence and capabilities who became cold and heartless in the process of achieving her professional success. On these characters, Brontë shows women scarcely get everything – both emotional and professional fulfilment without losing their own personalities. Lucy herself longs to become independent but she also longs for love which seems much less likely for her to achieve, and so she refuses to admit her feelings and tries her best to focus on her work as the course of the world favour materialism and comfort before emotional fulfilment. As a result, her outward personality seems cold as her very name suggests and readers are made to fear she is getting closer to becoming another Madame Beck – her enjoyment of observations is on the verge on becoming spying – an activity the headmistress Beck engages in almost all the time.

Lucy is, in a way, saved by Paul Emanuel – a tutor working in the very same school who teaches Lucy French. Paul is a passionate man who encourages Lucy to express herself – he makes her reveal to him her inner personality by challenging her, making her angry and at last, making her fall in love with him. He sees in her Paul a ‘young she wild creature, new caught, untamed, viewing with a mixture of fire and fear the first entrance of the breaker-in’<sup>232</sup>. Lucy finally feels liberated and acknowledges her feelings for Dr John were based on their repression and even if he loved Lucy back, her personality was too shallow to make her happy. Paul Emanuel loves Lucy and through receiving love from him, she is able to find a way to love herself and to embrace her personality as a whole. This is represented by the fact she is now strong enough to face the forces that repress her by destroying the vision of a nun which appears to her throughout the novel as the embodiment of her repressed self, Lucy creates in her mind (though a reasonable explanation of the appearance of the nun is later revealed by Ginevra).

My head reeled, for by the faint night-lamp, I saw stretched on my bed the old phantom – the NUN. A cry at this moment might have ruined me. Be the spectacle what it might, I

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<sup>232</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, 302.

could afford neither consternation, scream, nor swoon. Besides, I was not overcome. Tempered by late incidents, my nerves disdained hysteria. Warm from illuminations, and music, and thronging thousands, thoroughly lashed up by a new scourge, I defied spectra. I a moment, without exclamation, I had rushed on the haunted couch; nothing leaped out, or sprang, or stirred; all the movement was mine, so was all the life, the reality, the substance, the force; as my instinct felt. I tore her up – the incubus! I held her on high – the goblin! I shook her loose – the mystery! And down she fell – down all round me – down in shreds and fragments – and I trode upon her.<sup>233</sup>

By destroying the repressions of herself, Lucy becomes a complete personality who is free to love and feel without guilt and finally for her “the blooming and charming Present prevailed over the Past”<sup>234</sup>. Just as Brontë aimed to portray a marriage of full equality in *Jane Eyre*, she wished to free her heroine in *Villette* from any kind of repression, making her fully independent. Lucy therefore does not end up in a marriage with Paul Emanuel, who presumably dies at sea (though his fate is not explicitly stated). The importance of her relationship with Paul lays in the fact he helped her discover her passionate personality and encouraged her to express it as he loved her mind as a whole. Thus, Lucy was enabled to love herself and accept her personality which was her ultimate goal all the time. Brontë shows it is not marriage what should be perceived as the most desired achievement for people – it is embracing one’s mind and putting an end to repressions binding the psyche.

### **10.3.3. Search for independence and one own’s identity**

In the novel, Brontë not only slowly reveals Lucy’s identity, she is forming it and developing it. Lucy herself is continually discovering new sides of her psyche struggling to repress the parts she cannot connect with reason. Her journey for independence is one of discovering and embracing her-self as a complete human being with everything that belongs to it, including her femininity and solitariness explored in the previous two sub-chapters. She tries to detach herself from her emotions which is represented by her describing her own self in a dual manner – she often separates ‘I’ from her name ‘Lucy Snowe’. Lucy Snowe is her public self, cold as her name suggests and inconspicuous. The ‘Snowe’ is, apart from the coldness and detachment also a

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<sup>233</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, 624.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 620.

symbol of covering her inner personality she does not allow anyone to see. Nobody seem to remember her and recognize her – while she immediately recognized Dr John was in fact Graham Bretton, she withdrew this knowledge from both readers and Bretton as she did not think he would care to know, it in fact ‘never occurred to her as possible that he should recognize Lucy Snowe.’<sup>235</sup>

Living her life through the lives of others as a silent observer, she is a figure invisible to those around her, and she does not seem to care – though, more likely, she does not want to seem as she does. When Ginevra Fanshawe without any scruples describes Lucy to her own eyes as follows:

I suppose you are nobody’s daughter, since you took care of little children when you first came to Villette: you have no relations; you can’t call yourself young at twenty-three; you have no attractive accomplishments – no beauty,<sup>236</sup>

Lucy does not get angry, though she is obviously silently hurt by these words. Yet, Lucy always strives to fight her feelings and permits herself just short and private explosions of her passions only to recollect her façade and become ‘Lucy Snowe’ again in the end:

I never had felt so strange and contradictory an inward tumult as I felt for an hour that evening: soreness and laughter, and fire, and grief, shared my heart between them. I cried hot tears; not because madame mistrusted me – I did not care two-pence for her mistrust – but for other reasons. Complicated, disquieting thoughts broke up the whole repose of my nature. However, that turmoil subsided: next day I was again Lucy Snowe.<sup>237</sup> 152-153

Lucy’s pilgrimage is painful and is not rewarded with a classical happy-ending, but she eventually becomes a strong independent woman who can finally understand her mind which Brontë sees as a greater accomplishment than getting married. It is love, not marriage what helps Lucy to finally accept herself for who she is so she can live a life of her own. Nestor argues that it is actually crucial for Lucy’s development that she starts to perceive herself ‘as an agent rather than a victim’<sup>238</sup>. Paul Emanuel shows Lucy, it is a part of human nature to have passions and desires and that she should not be afraid to express herself – he teaches her the very same thing Brontë’s tutor Constantine Héger, who is believed to be an inspiration for Paul’s character, encouraged

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<sup>235</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, 230.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 152-153.

<sup>238</sup> Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë*, 93.

Charlotte to do in her writing. The artistic element of the revelation of self is very important for Lucy's journey – her repressed passions and desires are represented in the painting of Cleopatra. Lucy is curious and disgusted about at the same time, stating that the portrayed woman 'had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa. She ought likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly, which was not the case: out of abundance of material – seven-and-twenty yards, I should say, of drapery – she managed to make inefficient raiment.'<sup>239</sup>, and later when she goes to theatre to see the most famous actress in Europe, Vashti, who is a symbol of provocative and powerful emotions.

Only when Lucy accepts her own emotions raging inside of her, is she able to form her identity and achieve professional success – a process much similar to the artistic development of Charlotte Brontë herself.

#### **10.4. Summary of similarities with *The Professor*, *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley***

In her last novel, Brontë takes the best from her previous works while focusing in more detail on the technique and careful building of the story. That is the reason why *Villette* is Brontë's favourite piece among critics. Where *Jane Eyre* was based on a simple, straightforward story and *Shirley* lacked unity, *Villette* is both complicated and holds perfectly together.

With regards to the form of the novel, Brontë listened to the critics and returned to autobiographical portrayal of her heroine's experience used in her first two novels but she also, being her own woman, let her artistic skills flow free and again found her way to experiment – this time by using a modern way of unreliable narrative voiced by Lucy Snowe, who is the most unlikely hero of all Brontë's previous novels – plain, inconspicuous and without any striking characteristics – she does not possess male privileges as William, she is not morally superior as Jane, she is not beautiful as Caroline and she is yet to find her way to be strong and independent like Shirley. All this makes her even more relatable to readers who can thus identify themselves in Lucy Snowe with all her flaws and sufferings. However, Lucy has a common goal with her predecessors – she has desires and aspirations, she longs for both emotional and professional fulfilment and independence, her main goal is to break free from the social

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<sup>239</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, 262.

prison and in the process from her own repressions in order to find a unity in her identity. These are the ultimate goals of all Brontë's protagonists, their paths to achieve these goals are what differs.

The comparison is in place especially with the first novel Brontë wrote and never succeeded to publish in her lifetime, *The Professor*, as it draws on the same real-life experience of the author. There are many similarities in terms of the content among these two novels – the protagonists of both books go on a journey to become teachers in a school in Belgium aiming to achieve independence and in the process, find their own identities and love. The crucial difference between these two stories is in the fact, Brontë switched a male protagonist for a female whose isolation and repression of mind is much more powerful and relatable and her journey thus made more complicated as she had to overcome the obstacles the society placed in women's way to independence. The theme of isolation is made even stronger in *Villette* as Lucy is a prisoner of both outer world and her own mind. Though Brontë attempted to deal with the topic of gender issues in her first novel, she could only achieve its fullness in getting a female in the centre of the story.

Her characters are, however, not the same – Brontë does not generalize neither women nor men, on the contrary, she seeks uniqueness which suffers under the conventionalities of their social environment. Her male characters are by far not all villainous, in fact, they have a crucial role in helping the female protagonist to reach their achievements – be it passively as Mr. Rochester or Robert Moore who have to find their own way to match the moral superiority of their female counterparts, or by Emanuel Paul's active encouraging Lucy to express herself and accept her identity just like he did.

The ending of the novel is ambiguous though easily deduced – as Lucy Snowe tells her story in retrospect as an old lady who is still Lucy Snowe, and therefore most likely single, Paul Emanuel probably died at the sea when his boat ship-wrecked and never returned to Lucy. In fact, the original ending Brontë used was explicit and the death of Emanuel clearly stated – however, her father was shocked and asked Charlotte to make the ending less painful and hard for readers. *Villette* is therefore the only novel from the pen of Charlotte Brontë, in which the protagonist is not re-united with her loved-one after a period of separation. Lucy indeed ends up as a single and independent woman running her own successful school in Belgium.

It is not only the ending making the novel the most tragic at the first sight, the

overall tone of *Villette* is filled with the feeling of isolation and loss. Brontë wrote the novel alone, without advice from her siblings and sisters especially as they all died not long before she started to write. The personal tragedy helped Brontë to channel her emotions and transfer her together with her youth experience and imagination into the most powerful of her work – *Villette*, which thus marks and finishes her development as both woman and an artist who always found her way to listen to the critics while retaining her individual approach and though she always drew on her personal experience, except for *Shirley* (even there, however, are many elements from Brontë's own life), and the primary themes of her novels are recurring, each of her novel is different – be it in its form, narrative style, approach to the themes or characters.

## CONCLUSION

When analysing Charlotte Brontë's work and its development, it is important to note that Brontë started to write and think of authorship when she was only a child engaging in plays with her siblings. She took her ambition seriously and produced a great number of juvenile stories and poems while looking for an inspiration mainly in the works of famous writers of her time, and thus slowly developing her own style. A crucial element for Brontë's early artistic development was the support of her father and the collaboration with her siblings who also spent a lot of their time by writing and commenting on each other's works which made it possible for Emily and Anne to become writers as well. Charlotte Brontë would probably never achieve such success in the literary world if it was not for her liberal upbringing, influence of her siblings and the inspiring environment of the wild nature of the moors right behind her window. Though readers and critics often wonder how she, a woman from a village somewhere in Yorkshire, could write such imaginative novels, it is not such a great surprise when we consider the nature of her childhood. As this thesis deals with Brontë's development as a writer, it was crucial for understanding of her work to focus in greater detail on this part of her life, when her artistic self begun to shape itself, and therefore there are several chapters on this subject in the first part of the thesis.

While growing up, Brontë also slowly began to notice how the society around her worked. She saw how hard it was for women to express themselves both emotionally and professionally and perceived this as an unjust repression she later felt herself when her novels were criticized on the basis of prudish Victorian values. As a woman of strong urge for independence and ambition, Brontë made these issues one of her main focus in her novels. Although in our present day, it is somewhat expected, if not required, for people to raise awareness of topics connected with the issues in society, it was not the case in the Victorian era. It was not a place for women to criticize their status and it was definitely not a place for them to do so publicly in the form of literature. Brontë, however, was a brave woman who was not afraid to address the 'Woman question' in her work, and she did it so masterfully that her novels are up to this date a representation of female strength and capability. As the historical context was thus also an important element in Brontë's development, both as a woman and as a

writer, the thesis introduces the times when she created her novels in greater detail as well.

Charlotte Brontë was well aware that to become a successful author, she would need an inspiration of her own, which awoken her desire to travel and to explore new aspects of life. Though her experience was quite limited in the end, as she spent most of her life not traveling (though she visited Belgium) but teaching – as a governess in private households or as a teacher in schools, she was still able to draw on her experience as best as she could, resulting in producing four different novels. Another part of the thesis is therefore dedicated to Brontë's experience outside of her home in Haworth, especially her stay in Brussels as the experience she got there helped her to write two novels.

Brontë's 'Belgium experience' was, however, not crucial for her writing development only because she gathered materials for her future work there – the most important part for her truly professional progress was the fact she received tutoring from Constantine Héger, a highly esteemed literary professor, who helped Brontë to master her writing technique, and thus perfect the form of her work. At the same time, he encouraged her to let her passion and emotion loose while writing, in order to create truly powerful pieces of art. While Brontë was initially hesitant to express her private emotions, which is evident in her first novel *The Professor*, it was eventually what made her work truly remarkable and recognized among readers.

Brontë produced her novels only after achieving a certain state of development and the first part of the thesis is thus fully dedicated to her journey in becoming the author. The second part of the thesis is then more analytical as it focuses on the four individual novels of Charlotte Brontë. As her writing development was hardly at an end, the novels are analysed in chronological order of when Brontë wrote them, although her first novel *The Professor* was published only posthumously.

In analysing the novels, I have focused on the aspects of both form and content to be able to trace Brontë's development as fully as possible. Brontë was a writer who was at the same time sensitive to criticism and determined to produce a work which would be true to her heart. In this way, Brontë went through the same struggle as the protagonists of all her novels – she wanted to comply with the standards of the society and longed for her work to be well accepted while at the same time she wanted to express herself, to show that there is nothing wrong on being passionate and longing for professional, emotional and sexual fulfilment.

In the course of her career, it is evident Brontë was in conflict over these two sides of her personality, she tried to maintain her anonymity behind the pen name for as long as possible while she also wanted to be appreciated and recognized as a woman writer giving voice to all repressed women of Victorian society. The development of this struggle is evident in her novels – at first, she hides behind a male protagonist in *The Professor* only for it to be rejected by the publishers for not being powerful and dramatic enough – so she finally decides to embrace her gender and create a female character of great passion but also of strong moral personality. Though *Jane Eyre* is a woman of high moral standards, Brontë still faced backlash as the novel was perceived as coarse and too daring in picturing an independent female character. In her next work, she therefore tries to do something completely different – seeking inspiration in the works of Scott or Thackeray, Brontë writes a social historical novel which is, however, marked by the tragic death of her siblings which significantly influenced the writing process the result of which is *Shirley*, an inconsistent novel least similar to Brontë's remaining work. Its difference of style, however, marks Brontë's progress and taste for experimentation. She was yet to come up with another experiment in her last novel, when Brontë looked ahead of her time and applied a literary device of a highly unreliable narrator in *Villette*. Her artistic development is all the more evident as she got back to the story used in her first written novel *The Professor*. Utilizing the same experience and memories, she produced an utterly different novel in terms of its narrative style and thematic approach by which she marked her final progress as a writer.

Comparing the novels by finding the differences and, most importantly, similarities, is another aim of this thesis connected with the focus on Brontë's development as a writer. The features all the novels have in common serve as an important 'vehicle' to see how Brontë's approach to these features changed throughout her career. In four novels, Brontë explored especially the theme of gender issues, and she did so on many different levels – she focused on its social aspect, its influence on the private side of human psyche and on how it can be crucial in changing the course of people's lives. She did the same with the topic of religion as she explored its positive aspects as well as the repressive side of the church and its incapability. Her view on isolation also changed and became more prominent in her last works as she experienced the most painful side of being alone herself when she remained the last surviving daughter of her father.

Although Brontë's work is often considered as a whole and unified in its features, there is an evident progress in the novels and their author's approach. Brontë as a writer was evolving in time, influenced both by the opinions of critics and readers and by her own mind, and we may say that she thankfully always sided with listening to her own artistic self, which allowed her to produce timeless novels that find their readers even more than hundred years after their first publication.

The aim of this thesis in general, was to present the work of one of the most recognized female writers of all times in a complex way by focusing on what influenced Brontë's development and how her work changed and evolved novel to novel and thus marking her artistic development.

## SHRNUTÍ

Při analýze vývoje díla britské spisovatelky Charlotte Brontë je nutné si uvědomit, že Brontë začala psát a přemýšlet o autorství už během svého dětství při hrách se svými sourozenci. Své literární ambice brala vážně, a vytvořila tak velké množství mladických příběhů a básní, pro které hledala inspiraci především v dílech slavných spisovatelů své doby, čímž pomalu pilovala svůj vlastní styl. Zásadním prvkem pro raný umělecký vývoj Brontë byla podpora jejího otce a spolupráce s jejími sourozenci, kteří rovněž trávili spoustu svého času psaním a vzájemným komentováním své práce, díky čemuž se spisovatelkami staly také její sestry Emily a Anne. Charlotte Brontë by pravděpodobně nikdy nedocílila tak značného úspěchu v literárním světě nebýt její liberální výchovy, spolupráce se sourozenci a inspirujícímu prostředí divoké přírody vřesovišť, nacházejících se hned za jejími okny. Ačkoli se čtenáři a kritici často podivují, jak mohla žena z vesnice někde v hrabství Yorkshire, vytvořit tak imaginativní romány, není tento fakt až tak překvapující vezmeme-li v potaz to, jakým způsobem vyrůstala. Vzhledem k tomu, že se tato práce zabývá vývojem díla Charlotte Brontë jakožto spisovatelky, bylo velmi důležité pro pochopení jejího díla zaměřit se v úvodu této práce také na tuto ranou část jejího života, kdy se její umělecká osobnost začala poprvé formovat. Několik kapitol v první části diplomové práce je tak věnováno právě tomuto období.

Během vyrůstání si Brontë rovněž začala všimnout toho, jak funguje společnost, v níž žila. Měla možnost vidět, jak náročné bylo pro ženy vyjádřit se ať už emocionálně či profesionálně, a spatřovala v tom nespravedlivou represi, kterou později pocítila na vlastní kůži, když byly její romány kritizovány na základě prudérních viktoriánských hodnot. Jakožto ambiciózní žena se silnou touhou po nezávislosti udělala z tohoto problému jeden z hlavních tematických prvků svého díla. Ačkoliv se v dnešní době očekává, ne-li dokonce vyžaduje, aby lidé veřejně poukazovali na problémová témata společnosti, Viktoriánská éra byla jiný případ. Tato doba nedávala ženám prostor pro kritiku jejich postavení a už vůbec jim to nechtěla dovolit dělat veřejně formou literatury. Charlotte Brontë však byla statečná žena, která se ve svých dílech nebála poukazovat na téma ženské otázky a činila to natolik mistrovsky, že i dnes jsou její romány symbolem ženské síly a schopností. Právě proto, že byl historický kontext natolik důležitým prvkem vývoje Brontë jakožto ženy a spisovatelky, tato práce rovněž obsahuje podrobnější kapitolu zabývající se dobou, ve které Brontë psala své romány.

Charlotte Brontë si dobře uvědomovala, že k tomu, aby se mohla stát úspěšnou autorkou, potřebovala svou vlastní inspiraci, což v ní probudilo touhu cestovat a objevovat nové aspekty života. I přes to, že její životní zkušenosti byly nakonec pouze omezené, neboť většinu svého krátkého života strávila nikoli cestováním (přestože strávila nějaký čas v Belgii), ale učením – jakožto guvernánka v soukromých domácnostech či jako učitelka ve školách, byla i tak schopná z této inspirace čerpat, jak nejlépe mohla, výsledkem čehož jsou celkem čtyři různé romány. Další část této práce je z tohoto důvodu věnována zkušenostem, které Brontë nasbírala mimo její domov ve vesnici Haworth, zejména pak jejímu pobytu v Bruselu, který jí byl inspirací hned pro dva romány.

Její 'belgická zkušenost' však nebyla pro vývoj jejího díla zásadní pouze pro to, že během ní získala materiál k románům – nejzásadnější částí jejího skutečně profesionálního růstu bylo, že zde obdržela lekce od Constantina Hégera, vysoce váženého profesora literatury, který dopomohl Brontë k ovládnutí její techniky psaní, a díky tomu tak ke zdokonalení formy její práce. Zároveň ji také povzbuzoval k tomu, aby při psaní povolila uzdu svým vášním a emocím, aby tak byla schopná vytvořit opravdu silná umělecká díla. Přestože byla Charlotte ve vyjadřování svých emocí nejdříve nerozhodná, což je patrné na jejím prvním románu *Profesor*, se později tento expresivní přístup stal tím, co učinilo její práci opravdu jedinečnou a oceňovanou mezi čtenáři.

Brontë začala s psaním románů pouze poté, kdy dosáhla určitého uměleckého vývoje, a první část této práce je tak plně věnována její cestě k tomu stát se autorkou literárních děl. Druhá část práce je poté více analytická, neboť se zaměřuje přímo na čtyři jednotlivé romány z pera Charlotte Brontë. Protože spisovatelský vývoj Brontë nebyl ani zdaleka u konce, jsou v této práci její romány analyzovány v chronologickém pořadí jejich vzniku, ačkoli první román *Profesor* byl publikován až po smrti jeho autorky.

Při analýze románů jsem se zaměřila na aspekt jak jejich formy, tak obsahu, s cílem sledovat vývoj práce Brontë co možná nejúplněji. Brontë byla spisovatelkou, která byla citlivá ke kritice a zároveň pevně rozhodnutá psát díla, která by byla pravdivá jejímu srdci. V tomto ohledu procházela Brontë stejnými útrapami jako hrdinky a hrdinové všech jejích románů – chtěla vyhovět společenským standardům a toužila po tom, aby její práce byla dobře přijatá, a zároveň chtěla vyjádřit sama sebe a poukázat na fakt, že není nic špatného na tom mít své vášně a toužit po profesionálním,

emocionálním i sexuálním naplnění.

Z průběhu její kariéry je patrné, že Brontë prožívala konflikt těchto dvou stran její osobnosti, kdy se snažila udržet si svou anonymitu při používání pseudonymu, ale také se chtěla stát oceňovanou a uznávanou ženou spisovatelkou, která by poskytla hlas všem utlačovaným ženám ve viktoriánské společnosti. Vývoj tohoto vnitřního boje je patrný i v jejích románech – nejdříve se schovává za mužského protagonistu v *Profesorovi*, který byl však vydavateli odmítnut pro nedostatečnou sílu a dramatičnost, a tak se Brontë konečně rozhodla ve svém díle přijmout své pohlaví a vytvořit ženskou postavu s vášnivým srdcem, ale také se silnou morální osobností. Přestože je Jana Eyrová hrdinkou s vysoce morálními standardy, i tak se Brontë dočkala kritiky, protože její první publikovaný román byl společností vnímán jako hrubý a příliš odvážný v zobrazování nezávislé ženské postavy. Ve své další práci se tak Brontë pokusila o něco naprosto jiného – vyhledala inspiraci v díle Scotta či Thackeraye a vytvořila společenský historický román, jehož tvorba byla však ovlivněna tragickou smrtí jejích sourozenců, což se na díle výrazně projevilo, a výsledkem pak byl nekonzistentní román *Shirley*, který nejméně zapadá do celkového díla Brontë. Rozdílnost ve stylu tohoto románu však značí vývoj Brontë jakožto spisovatelky, která se nebojí experimentovat a zkoušet nové věci. Její další literární experiment měl přijít hned v jejím dalším, posledním, románu s názvem *Villette*, ve kterém Brontë předčila svou dobu a využila literární prvek nevěrohodného vypravěče. Umělecký vývoj díla Brontë je o to patrnější, že se ve svém posledním románu vrátila k příběhu použitým v jejím vůbec prvním dokončeném díle *Profesor*. Přestože využila stejné zkušenosti a vzpomínky, vytvořila román, který je úplně jiný jak formou vyprávění, tak tematickým přístupem, a je umělecky mnohem hodnotnější než její prvotina, čímž Brontë dokončila svůj spisovatelský růst.

Porovnávání románů a nalézání rozdílů, a především podobností je dalším cílem této práce, který navazuje na spisovatelský vývoj Brontë. Prvky, které mají všechny její romány společné slouží v této práci jako nástroj ke sledování toho, jak se přístup Brontë k těmto spisovatelským elementům měnil během její kariéry. Ve všech čtyřech románech se Brontë věnuje především tématu problému pohlaví, a to na nejrůznějších úrovních – zaměřila se na společenský aspekt této otázky, jeho vliv na osobní stránku lidské psychiky a na to, jak tento prvek může zásadně ovlivnit kurz lidských životů. To samé Brontë učinila s tématem náboženství, kdy objevovala jeho pozitivní aspekty, stejně jako represivní stránku církve a její neschopnost. Její pohled na téma izolace se

také postupně měnil a stal se čím dál prominentnější v jejím závěrečném díle, během jehož psaní prožila bolestné období samoty, kdy zůstala poslední přeživší dcerou svého otce.

Přestože je dílo Brontě často považováno za unifikovanou jednotku v jeho prvcích, je na něm vidět evidentní pokrok v přístupu autorky. Brontě se jakožto spisovatelka vyvíjela v čase, kdy jí ovlivnily jak názory kritiků a čtenářů, tak její vlastní mysl a s odstupem můžeme říct, že naštěstí vždy měla blíže k tomu, aby poslechla své vlastní umělecké já, díky čemuž vytvořila nadčasové romány, které si nacházejí čtenáře i více než sto let od jejich prvotní publikace.

Obecně byl cíl této práce představit dílo jedné z nejuznávanějších ženských spisovatelek komplexním způsobem, kdy jsem se zaměřila na to, co ovlivnilo vývoj Charlotte Brontě a jak se její práce měnila a rozvíjela od románu k románu, čímž jsem sledovala její umělecký vývoj.

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## ANOTACE

Tato diplomová práce se věnuje vývoji Charlotte Brontë jakožto spisovatelky na základě historického kontextu Viktoriánské Anglie a nejdůležitějších událostí v životě Brontë – její výchovy, rodiny, vzdělání, práce na pozici guvernanky a pobytu v Bruselu.

Tyto historické a biografické prvky jsou popsány v první části práce, kterou následuje část druhá, která obsahuje analýzu čtyř románů Charlotte Brontë: *Profesor*, *Jana Eyrová*, *Shirley* a *Villette*. Analýza těchto děl se zaměřuje především na hledání společných prvků a témat, a to za účelem sledování vývoje autorského stylu Brontë a určení toho, jak se její práce a myšlenky měnily od románu k románu v kontextu její životní zkušenosti.

Hlavním cílem práce je předložit komplexní přehled o Charlotte Brontë jakožto spisovatelce, která se ve svých románech nebála věnovat společenským problémům své doby, a to i přes to, že jakožto žena byla vnímána jako druhořadý občan, od kterého se neočekávaly žádné komentáře na stav společnosti, a už vůbec ne jeho kritika.

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### **Klíčová slova**

britská literatura, 19. století, Brontë Charlotte, *Profesor*, *Jana Eyrová*, *Shirley*, *Villette*, viktoriánský román, viktoriánská literatura, Haworth, žena spisovatelka, feminismus

## ANNOTATION

This diploma thesis is dedicated to Charlotte Brontë's development as a writer on the basis of historical context of the Victorian England and the most influential events of Brontë's life including her upbringing, family, education, working as a governess and her stay in Brussels.

These historical and biographical elements are described in the first part of the thesis which is then followed by the second part containing the analysis of Charlotte's four novels *The Professor*, *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley* and *Villette*. In analysing these novels, the primary focus is laid on finding common features and themes in order to trace the development of Brontë's writing style and to determine how her work and ideas changed novel to novel in context of her life experience.

The main aim of the thesis is to provide a complex overview of Charlotte Brontë as a writer who was not afraid to deal with social issues of her time in her novels despite being a woman, and therefore being considered a second-class citizen who is not expected to comment on the state of society, let alone to criticise it.

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