

## Class Consciousness in Charlotte Brontë’s *The Professor* (1857)

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### Abstract

This article is a reflection on the victorian society as described by Charlotte Bronte. It tries to highlight the different evils of English society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, it shows to what extent the themes of class struggle, solitude, gender, and, finally, social injustice, are « boisterous metaphors » to the writer Charlotte Bronte.

**Keywords:** society, solitude, struggle, stratification, injustice, poverty, social class, man, woman

### Résumé

Cet article est une réflexion sur la société victorienne telle qu'elle est décrite par Charlotte Brontë. Ce papier tente de mettre en lumière les différents maux de la société anglaise du 19<sup>ème</sup> siècle. En effet, il montre à quel point les thèmes de la lutte des classes, de la solitude, du genre et, enfin de l'injustice sociale sont des « *métaphores obnubilantes* » chez l'écrivaine Charlotte Brontë.

**Mots-clés :** société, solitude, lutte, stratification, injustice, pauvreté, classe sociale, homme, femme.

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## 1. Introduction

Born in April 1816 in Thornton, Yorkshire, in the north of England to Maria Branwell and Patrick Brontë, Charlotte Brontë was the third child of her parents and the most prolific writer among 'the Brontës. According to George Lewes; Charlotte was "*alittle, plain, provincial, sickly-looking old maid*" (Leavis, 1989, p.7). This description of Charlotte Brontë sheds light on her characteristic.

The appointment of her father, Patrick as a perpetual curate of Haworth is essential in Charlotte's life. Indeed, Haworth had formed Charlotte's taste, but at the same time, it deprived her of congenial society since they had a provincial life in Haworth.

Meanwhile, the loss of their mother triggered a new event in the children's life; for, being brought up by an austere father and a strict, religious, Aunt Elizabeth Branwell, they seemed to be lost in their life. They lacked a model to follow in their immediate surroundings. Imbued with the sentiment of educating them by her philosophy, Aunt Branwell was apt to encourage styles of dress and hair in her nieces, which were old fashioned, and then set a barrier between the children and their contemporaries.

Even though they lacked a mother's tender affection, the Brontës managed to dig out their way. To escape their unhappy surrounding, in other words, the world of the adults, precisely the real world, the children became solitary and left to their resources; they started creating the imaginary kingdoms and fantasylands of Angria and Gondal. The so-called inner life they were compelled to live due to their hostile environment urged Charlotte to say:

*We were wholly dependent on ourselves and each other, on books and study for the enjoyments and occupations of life.* (Barker, 1995, p. 240)

The loss of siblings, Maria and Elizabeth created a profound shock in Charlotte Brontë. She found literature as the only way she had to express her feelings and thoughts, even though it was forbidden for women to write novels.

Charlotte's point of view to face the reality of things is why she cries out: "*I believe single women should have more to do better chances of interesting and profitable occupation than they possess now*" (Barker, p. 262). This assertion is a plea for women's liberation and an answer to the prejudicial beliefs men have about women. For Victorian men thought that literature was not good for women. It deprived them of three crucial qualities: softness, tenderness, and grace. It is in this context that Charlotte, under the pseudonym of Currer Bell, became the spokeswoman for the poor, especially for women of her age.

Thus, the first chapter of this paper examines a hostile family environment with all its aspects. In other terms, the difficulties faced by the people of the same family, their relationship and the causes of these difficulties, and the impact they have on the characters. The second one focuses on social stratification. It pinpoints the class problem between the poor and the rich and the perpetual conflict between the two groups.

## 2. A HOSTILE FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

Since the loss of Eden, man is confronted with many realities in life. He is hindered by many problems so it is sometimes difficult to find a way out. The family, being the primary environment for each person to live, will be a place of struggle. For instance, Mr. William Crimsworth's story is very telling because, at the beginning of the novel, he faces sibling rivalry. Indeed, Mr Edward Crimsworth regards his brother, William as nothing but a servant. A servant who will do and accept everything in his factory. "*do as I order*" (Bronte. 1857, p.12).

The protagonist is so faithful to his brother that he becomes an engine in the factory. As a servant, he has concluded that he should perform his duty well to be accepted by his elder brother. At first, William means to be good at X, where his brother is living, for he wants to avenge the name of his father which is trodden down by his uncles. But, he will be disappointed by his brother's attitude.

As a result, William's sorry plight is reminiscent of Cinderella, who is ill-treated by her step-sisters. Like Cinderella, William is crushed and enslaved by his brother. What is again more painful, is even his good actions are not seen as deserving. He is miserable so much so that his only hope to obtain a joyful life is to send his imagination to these ideal places known as the land of fantasy and where all those deprived of love or under the need come for compensation and consolation. In this regard, the fairy tales are good examples of ill-treated people, especially children in the fact that like Cendrillon des frères Grimm, they give the children and even the adults a lesson of morality:

*Si malheureux que tu sois par moments - à cause de la rivalité fraternelle ou pour toute autre raison - tu peux de toi-même en sublimant ton malheur et la tristesse, arranger les choses de telle sorte que la vie dans le monde extérieur devienne satisfaisante. (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 386)*

Like Jane Eyre, who is trodden down by her cousin John Reed, for her being poor "*my father had been a poor clergyman*" (Bronte, 1847, p.58), William Crimsworth is also under the yoke of his brother. He is rejected since he is, first of all, a man without fortune. Besides, William's rejection by his brother, Edward is understandable, for the former reminds him of poverty. The protagonist is all the poorer as his brother sees him in his family as an intruder.

Therefore, he becomes an outcast of Edward's society and even loses his freedom because he does not have a spare-time in his brother's factory. Like an automaton, he performs his duty well, but he is not accepted by his brother, who prevents him from expressing his soul. For instance, during the party given by Edward to his society, the hero does not feel at ease since they do not belong to the same society, and dancing with them would be very harmful to the friends of his brother.

Consequently, he becomes an observer of the party and simultaneously isolated physically. He is oppressed so much so that his job is a prison for him like the red- room to Jane. The images of cold or ice testify to the physical sufferings of the protagonist. The “*feet froze*” (Bronte, 1857, p. 38), and the “*half-frozen water*” (p. 38) equates to the difficulties of the protagonist.

William's lack of freedom urges Hunsden his guardian angel to ask the question if he is a human being or not:

*What are you then? you sit at that desk in Crimsworth's counting- house day by day and week by week, scraping with a pen or paper, just like an automaton; you never get up; you never ask for a holiday; you never change or relaxation; you give way to no excess of an evening. You neither keep wild company nor indulge in a strong drink. (p. 35)*

Hunsden's question about Charlotte's hero in *The Professor* is remarkable. It insists on the labor undergone by the protagonist in his brother's factory. The lack of reaction “*you never change or relaxation*” (p. 35) towards his brother's ill-treatment is the reason why Hunsden compares the hero with an engine: An automaton.

Like Charlotte's heroine in *Jane Eyre*, William Crimsworth is oppressed physically in his brother's factory. He does not even have a spare-time to enjoy life. For instance, even the clerk, Timothy Steighton becomes an enemy of the protagonist. For he is afraid to lose his job since William is “*as exact as himself, and quicker*” (p. 22). Thus, Charlotte's protagonist has to cope with two enemies in the factory.

In this outlook, it is possible to make a comparison between William and Charlotte Brontë. As an autobiographical novelist, Charlotte may talk about her own experience. Indeed, she lost very early her mother and was brought up by her aunt Branwell. In all her novels, Charlotte aspires for an ideal of love since she was deprived of it like Jane Eyre and the Professor. For her, the only way to have it is to spend her time daydreaming. Her love myth is a deep human cry against the social problems in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Besides, the physical oppression undergone by the hero is directly linked to another pressure that is more striking in the protagonist's life. In this effect, the impact of the physical oppression upon the hero engenders a mental one. Whenever psychological oppression is

referred to, it is about a psychological limitation or psychological imprisonment. The hostile environment they are living, in triggers off psychological confinement to Charlotte's Brontë's character.

As an orphan, William has no one to protect him against the hardships and the incoherence of society. He becomes prey in his adoptive family. Indeed, his brother's behavior expresses a cruel antipathy against him. William is so affected by his brother's attitude that he concludes that he is not destined to be a tradesman. Like Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, who is oppressed by the adults in his environment due to their different points of view, William will be in the same strand.

He sees his brother's family as a social network that will not allow him to perform his duty and prevent him from becoming free because there are members in the family who embody a psychological hindrance. William decides to exile to another place where his spirit can express itself freely. However, these inner sufferings are likely to refer to the hardships undergone by the Brontë sisters, who used to be under the yoke of their brother, John Branwell. Even though the professor is a male character, his writings pinpoint the hand of a female who is nothing but Charlotte, denouncing the male's behavior.

Nowadays, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in England, one is respected if he has money. In so doing, those who are poor, are despised and are regarded as instruments. This point of view of the aristocrats has a terrible impact on the people experiencing poverty, especially on the protagonist.

In *The Professor*, William undergoes the same difficulties as Jane due to his dependence upon his uncles. This dependence is all the more damaging to the young protagonist's welfare. He does not know which step to follow. But his uncles' aim to channel his life will stop since he wants to be free of any choice he makes for his future. He does not want to be any longer dependent on his uncles because it is a painful shame to be burdensome. He again feels it humiliating when he finds that his uncles want to channel his life, for they promote his education out of interest.

In addition, William undergoes the same realities as Jane. Weak and innocent, he is first of all rejected by his uncles who want to use him as an instrument without a feeling, and by his brother who tyrannizes him spiritually. Consequently, this lack of warmth felt by William from his relatives represents a weight in his mind, and like the heroine, Jane Eyre, he starts questioning himself: "*Why did I make myself a tradesman?*" (Bronte. 1857, p. 38). In this respect, he needs to follow his instinct and reason which allow him to keep his freedom and help him at the same time to resist his heartless oppressors

### 3. SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

From the opening pages to the end of the novels, the social relationship people have depends a great deal on their belonging to a social class. In *The Professor*, from the beginning, it is clearly shown that there is a difference between the inhabitants of X and that there is a set hierarchy to respect, for it is the way the society is structured. The people, at the top of the ladder, are the employers. They are generally the gentry, the headmaster, and sometimes the clergy members. They are, for most of the time, the owner of the production. Next to this group, appears another one. It composes of the teachers, governesses, and servants even though the teachers have a more important position than the other two. But, under all these two groups, appears the outcasts who are the unemployed and who do not contribute very much to their society.

This position can be labeled to William Crimsworth in *The Professor*. William's mother is rejected by her brothers, for she marries a tradesman. His uncles who belong to the aristocracy cannot understand their sister's act. They are hurt so much that they prefer to get rid of her in their family "*My mother lived in destitution for six months after him, unhelped by her aristocratical brothers*" (Bronte, 1857, p. 20). The narrator's sentence points out well the importance of position or rank in the novel. Crimsworth's uncles' attitude towards their sister is comprehensible. They are usually taught from the beginning of their childhood to adulthood that they are superior to other people who do not belong to their class. In so doing, they have to take it as an order otherwise, they are liable to rejection.

The severe punishment undergone by the protagonist's mother towards her family makes William's rupture with his uncles predictable. As an innocent who does not understand the culture of his uncles, he thinks that his uncles' attitude is heartless and unbearable. For this reason, he finds it essential to break with his prideful uncles. Indeed, they have shown him since the beginning that he does not belong to their society. He is a sort of half-breed belonging to no specific class since his mother is an aristocrat and his father a tradesman.

Furthermore, Edward, the protagonist's brother, becomes a villain for him at X. His reproach obliterates any hope he has. In the beginning, when he leaves his uncle, he is very hopeful because he thinks that he will be on good terms with his brother. But this lustful hope will not be extended. His elder's behavior and manner of greeting him abruptly warns him that in the business context, they are no longer brothers, but they are now employers and employees.

From the starting point of their collaboration, Edward lets him know that they cannot live under the same roof. This counsel is very positive since it warns the narrator that they are now different. It also reveals that Crimsworth's elder brother is trying to draw a barrier between his brother and himself. He feels now that he cannot live with his employee under the same roof. This scornful conception towards his younger brother is clearly expressed by Edward when he tells the protagonist to find other means or his means of transport, for it is forbidden to go and come with him in the same gig.

Above all, these interdictions, which William is urged to accept and follow, express harshly the difference between the two brothers. Edward's way of oppressing is remarkably evocative, highlighting his financial superiority. It shows that the two brothers do not belong to the same social ladder. For Edward, business is business. He thinks that collaborating with his employees is dangerous in business. That is the reason why he will not do any favor to his brother, William:

*Hear once for all what I have to say about our relationship, and all that sort of humbug! I must have no nonsense on that point; it would never suit me. I shall excuse you nothing on the plea of being my brother; If I find you stupid, negligent, dissipated, idle, or possessed of any faults detrimental to the interests of the house, I shall dismiss you as I would any other clerk.* (Bronte. 1847, p. 19)

Edward's warning reminds the hero of his position and demonstrates his limitation in his brother's factory. It pinpoints that he will be respected if he does his duty. The employer's piece of advice is vital for the hero. It helps him to understand his situation as an employee. He knows he is no longer Edward's brother and understands that he will not have any favor "*I shall dismiss you as I would any other clerk*" (p. 19).

But what is more appealing is the protagonist's social situation in Edward's family. The warning of Edward to his wife "*not to be too familiar with his clerk*" (Bronte, 1857, p. 17) is very expressive, for it predicts that William will have a problem with integration if he lives in his brother's family. It also underlines a sign of Edward's contempt towards his employee. He thinks that the clerks are worthless beings and that cooperating with them will urge you, in the long run, to give them some favor. The coldness and restraint of Edward's wife towards William herald a problematic cohabitation between the hero and the wife since she sees him as an intruder.

Frances's case is also pitiful at Mdlle Zoraide Institution. As a lace-mending teacher, she is always disobeyed by her pupils because they are socially different. They are of noble origin or descent, whereas the teacher is from a poor origin. Her situation is rather odd because normally she should be ruling her pupils without any problem since she is the teacher and she is physically their superior as far as academic criteria are concerned. But, their status difference urges the young boarders to tease and disobey her overtly. It is one of the reasons why she confesses to the professor "*Here I only teach sewing, I can show no power in sewing, no superiority – it is a subordinate art.*" (Bronte, 1857, p. 138).

Frances's situation as a teacher in Mdlle Zoraide's school mirrors to a certain extent one part of Charlotte Brontë's life when she was a teacher at Heger's school in Brussels. Like Frances Henri, she faces the same problems. Her pupils were recalcitrant so much so that she was fed up with the job. She was not respected by the pupils because her position was rather odd.

She was halfway between being a pupil and being a teacher. But, contrary to Charlotte, Frances, despite the rudeness of her pupils, wins her way to success in her less critical profession.

Besides, it is interesting to mention that the stratification of this society will have an impact on the life of the characters. Marriage was a complex problem in that period because the relationship between people was based on ownership. Indeed, William faces a problem of love at Mdlle Zoraide's Institution. As a teacher in the establishment, he falls in love with the headmistress. But, his passion for Mdlle Reuter cannot exist because of their positions and functions.

It is an illegitimate love because Mdlle Reuter is the professor's employer. The structure of their society does not accept such a scheme. The teachers belong to a class different from the headmistresses who are usually like principals, and owners of the schools. In one of her discussions with M. Pelet, the headmistress declares that it is foolish to compare the hero, William, and M. Pelet "*Crimsworth's could not bear comparison with you either physically or mentally*" ( Bronte, 1857, p. 106). This declaration is fascinating in the sense that it clearly expresses the handicap of the professor. It shows that the professor is not loved by Mdlle Reuter because of two reasons: his physical aspect and his mentality.

In this context, it is imperative to wonder if the professor's inferiority is due to his education and status as a teacher or because of his origins. The headmistress's contempt for the teacher illustrates well the attitude of the aristocracy. They do not accept any person different from their class. This is why Mdlle Reuter's rejection of William's love is understandable, for she acts according to her social education. But, no one indicates this contempt for the people with low incomes more than Mr Hunsden:

*At your exemplary composure. Well, lad, I'll not bore you; I see how it is: Zoraide has jilted you – married someone richer, as any sensible woman would have done if she had the chance* (Bronte, 1857, p. 195)

Hunsden's inquiry about William's rejection by Mdlle Zoraide helps him to understand the importance of wealth, position, and influence in that society. The use of the word "*sensible*" (195) is evocative. It insinuates that rich women usually marry someone richer than them. Their only interest is to marry a gentleman who has money.

However, Hunsden is crucial in the life of William because he functions to a certain extent as an adjuvant during his initiation. Even though his intervention causes psychological oppression to Mr Crimsworth, it helps him to understand how his society functions. Finally, William has concluded that he should marry someone like him, someone who lives in the same condition as him. He knows that he is despised by someone with whom they share the same conditions. France's acceptance to marry William is very exciting, for it can be viewed in a double sense. First of all, it demonstrates that the two lovers are strangers in Belgium and



secondly, it sheds light on the structure of that society. As a teacher in Mdlle Zoraide's school, Frances is William's equal since they are both employees in the institution of Mdlle Zoraide.

Besides, in the 19th century, women were supposed to be good housewives. They had the right to choose between being an "angel!" in the home or a "monster". This classification created two categories of women. The first ones were those who were applied to be submissive and who had no preoccupation rather than pleasing their husbands. Their education was based on self-restraint "docility, submissiveness, selflessness" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1984, p. 54). The others were those who did not fit into those conventions. They were monsters, for they were usually labelled with the idea of prostitution.

Indeed, Charlotte Brontë is very much interested in the relationship between men and women. In *The Professor*, Frances, her heroine stands and fights for her rights. She starts from nothing, but through her efforts, she reaches the top of the social ladder. She escapes the trap of male power. In a letter to Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë expresses her satisfaction with the improvement of women's condition:

*Men begin to regard the position of woman in another light than they used to do; and a few men whose sympathies are fine and whose sense of justice is strong, think and speak of it with a candour that commands my admiration. They say, however, and to an extent, truly that the amelioration of our condition depends on ourselves (. . .); but as certainly there are other evils-deep rooted in the foundations of the social system which no efforts of ours can touch; of which we cannot complain; of which it is advisable not too often to think.*(Gaskell,1976, pp. 421-2)

Charlotte's position in women's condition reveals her personality. For Shebelieves in what Jean Jacques Rousseau said : « *renoncer à sa liberté, c'est renoncé à sa qualité d'homme, aux droits de l'humanité, même à ses devoirs. Il n'y a nul dédommagement possible pour quiconque renonce à tout ...* »(Rousseau, 1991, p. 29) In this outlook, Charlotte Brontë can be seen as a pioneer of the feminist literary movement protest.

## 4. Conclusion

The work aimed to present the impact of Victorian conventions on English people. In her two novels, Charlotte Brontë manages to give her point of view in a society based on many conceptions. Through memorable characters and an artful use of language, she denounces the Victorians' principles which tried to confine the poor people, especially women into submissiveness. As a committed writer, Charlotte Brontë through symbolism and interesting characters, challenges Victorian society by denouncing the sufferings of the oppressed.

All along *The Professor*, the author presents us as an orphan who has no family or friends, no wealth or position. Misunderstood and mistreated by his uncle and later on by his brother, he seems to live a life of failure since he is a stereotype of weak people.

He understands that poverty is not accepted by his society and knows that if he wants to be respected, he should toil and moil to reach fulfillment. This belief in social fulfillment can be explained by Charlotte's background. She has always been depicted as someone who is humane and sensible. Someone who likes friendships and accepting relationships. In this perspective, she becomes the spokeswoman of the fragile people.

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