BEFORE JANE EYRE: THE PROFESSOR

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Abstract: When Charlotte Brontë's name is uttered nowadays, readers will always bring her best-known novel (Jane Eyre) into discussion. While this book will be mentioned in our paper, we wish to focus on a different title, quite obscure when placed next to her other works: The Professor. We will focus on the female characters and on the voice presenting them: William Crimsworth. A rather unreliable narrator at times, we find his image interwoven with that of the women surrounding him and it is not advisable to overlook this aspect when we present the characters and what was expected of them.

Key words: The Professor, Charlotte Brontë, feminism, female characters, The Victorian Age

Charlotte Brontë's first novel, even though not her first attempt at writing, was *The Professor*, a small book written before *Jane Eyre*, but published in 1857 (after the death of its author), only after first being turned down by various publishers. Many of today's readers probably do not even know very much of its existence. It received negative reviews from the very beginning and even to this day it is considered (though not unjustly) inferior to *Jane Eyre*. Charlotte Brontë claimed in the preface that she wished to move away from the "ornamented and redundant composition" in favour of what was "plain and homely". She did not manage to keep the novel an unemotional tale, but it lacks artistic unity because of the restrictions she placed on her imagination. Robert Bernard Martin highlights the idea that themes which will be specific to her later works are introduced here, but the author could not handle the techniques that were to give them life later on.

The author used a male voice (William Crimsworth) to narrate the events, following thus the example of other women writers who tried to enter the male-dominated literary tradition by metaphorically impersonating a male and creating ambiguities when it came to their gender. As Gilbert and Gubar point out in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, this novel explores the problem of the "disinherited female" in a patriarchal society; it tries to solve the anxiety of the author by transforming her into a patriarchal male professor. By trying to adopt a masculine voice, a woman might get to see herself the same way as a man does. What interests us is the way gender issues are treated, the way themes that are sketched here will be developed in later works (A.B. Nicholls writes in the preface that *"the authoress made some use of the materials in a subsequent work – Villette"*) and how Brontë's experiences and prejudices influenced the development of the main theme: the relationship between men and women.

A vision of the male world is given, a world in which (doll-like, passive) women are judged from the perspective of young Crimsworth; we do not have direct access to women's thoughts, we cannot see into their souls. The narrator is an androgynous figure, with ambition specific to a man, but with reserve, passivity and desire to understand "the mysteries of femaleness" specific to a woman:

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"The first thing I did was to scrutinise closely the nailed boards, hoping to find some chink or crevice which I might enlarge, and so get a peep at the consecrated grounds. […] I thought it would have been so pleasant to have looked out upon a garden planted with flowers and trees, so amusing to have watched the *demoiselles* at their play, to have studied female character in a variety of phases, myself the while sheltered from view by a modest muslin curtain"[1].

Also, at least in the beginning of the novel, he is orphaned, disinherited by his mother's side of the family (because he refused to live his life by his relatives' rules) and just as powerless as any other female character, finding himself under his elder brother's power (an unjust, violent, but rich man who resorts to beating his wife when his business starts to fail) until he can no longer accept the unfair treatment. He rebels and escapes towards a place where he will not feel imprisoned[2]. Through William's eyes, we will see both the narrow, restricted female world of the pensionnat and the fact that a violent behaviour is not always punished. Edward Crimsworth is a tyrant towards his brother, his employees and later his wife. However, unlike William, he is good at business and knows how to make his way in life. Yes, he did lose his fortune once, but he got even richer because of railway speculations and his wife (who had returned to her parents) came back to him.

The novel is based on Brontë's experience as a student in Brussels (which will be used again in *Villette*), where she developed a – most probably unrequited – love for the married Belgian teacher Constantin Héger. The relationship between Crimsworth and Frances Henri develops from teacher and pupil, to friendship and love, winning the battle against the obstacles thrown in its way by the headmistress, Zoraïde Reuter. We cannot be sure about the objectivity of the narrator when describing the two women (and the girls from the pensionnat). He proves to share the same prejudices as the author (not unheard of during the Victorian Period): Protestants are said to be good and honest, while Catholics are manipulative and hypocrites; he is almost always ironic when speaking of Flemish people and (implicitly) of Catholics. The narrator looks down on what he calls "Romish wizard-craft" and the way it shapes the schoolgirls:

"Most of them could lie with audacity when it appeared advantageous to do so. All understood the art of speaking fair when a point was to be gained, and could with consummate skill and at a moment's notice turn the cold shoulder the instant civility ceased to be profitable. Very little open quarrelling ever took place amongst them; but backbiting and talebearing were universal. […] They were each and all supposed to have been reared in utter unconsciousness of vice. The precautions used to keep them ignorant, if not innocent, were innumerable. How was it, then, that scarcely one of those girls having attained the age of fourteen could look a man in the face with modesty and propriety? An air of bold, impudent flirtation, or a loose, silly leer, was sure to answer the most ordinary glance from a masculine eye. 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

[1] Brontë, Charlotte. *The Professor*. London: Wordsworth Classics, 1994, p 47.
[2] An idea brought forth by Gilbert and Gubar is that once he escaped the "female role" and the oppression, William becomes less and less androgynous. Throughout the course of the novel we see him evolving and becoming a man, his own person. While this evolution was considered normal for a man, when a woman followed the same steps towards independence, she faced the scorn of society.

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the discipline, if not the doctrines of the Church of Rome. I record what I have seen: these girls belonged to what are called the respectable ranks of society; they had all been carefully brought up, yet was the mass of them mentally depraved"[3].

How much of this description is accurate? We cannot be certain. William claims that he is not a bigot, but his words and attitude tell a different story. From the moment he first laid eyes on a Flemish chambermaid, he labelled her physiognomy as "eminently stupid" (chapter VII, p 41). He gives voice to Brontë's own opinion and describes the girls based on their religion. They are not criticised because they are girls (soon to become women), but because they are Catholic. A similar attitude can be felt towards Adèle from *Jane Eyre*, where everyone (Rochester, Jane, Madam Fairfax) try to "cure" the child of the habits picked up in France. Not only the students are judged through this perspective; the headmistress, Zoraïde Reuter, shares the same "fate":

"Now, *Zoraïde* Reuter," thought I, "has tact, caractère, judgment, discretion; has she heart? […] Even if she be truly deficient in sound principle, is it not rather her misfortune than her fault? She has been brought up a Catholic: had she been born an Englishwoman, and reared a Protestant, might she not have added straight integrity to all her other excellences? Supposing she were to marry an English and Protestant husband, would she not, rational, sensible as she is, quickly acknowledge the superiority of right over expediency, honesty over policy? It would be worth a man's while to try the experiment" [4].

He becomes infatuated with her because she seems to embody the ideal image of a woman in the eyes of a man, and he believes that he could change her ways according to the Protestant doctrine if they were to marry someday. Crimsworth does not appreciate duplicity and hypocrisy, while someone like M. Pelet (who will become her husband and who is the embodiment of the patriarchal establishment) admires it and considers it something natural in a woman and accepted by society. In the portrait drawn for the headmistress, Brontë's own distaste towards womanly duplicity (and the typical English idea that appearances must be kept no matter what) is made clear. William discovers quite easily (maybe too easily) who Zoraïde really is and turns his back on her.

The moment she no longer benefits from the attention of the English professor, Zoraïde (who was created after the model of Madame Héger) adopts a more servile attitude. The relationship between the two of them is described at one point as that between master and slave, where Zoraïde stepped into the slavish position[5] on her own (we only have William's point of view, therefore we cannot truly know why her attitude changes so much; it could be because she wanted to seduce him or she felt the change in the young man and was attracted by what she perceived as a strong male). It seems that behind the appearance of an angelic lady ("moderate, temperate, tranquil") hides a manipulative woman, a trait that destroys Crimsworth's admiration for her. Her attempts to woo him fail and she finds herself part of the patriarchal society once she marries Pelet (a marriage based on interest, not on the love between equals). Gilbert and

[3] Brontë, Charlotte. *The Professor*. London: Wordsworth Classics, 1994, p 71.
[4] *Ibidem*, chapter XII, p 79
[5] Mlle. Reuter "changes from mistress to slave, a metamorphosis that almost converts Crimsworth into a tyrant." (Martin, Robert Bernard, 1966, p 35)

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Gubar go as far as placing her in the role of the stepmother because of her treatment towards Frances, whom she fires just to keep her away from Crimsworth.

Frances Henri is a poor Protestant orphan (half English, half Swiss) and does not fall into the same category with the other girls. She works as a lace mender (she is called "governess-pupil" in the novel), is shy, intelligent and aware of her true nature (there is more than meets the eye in her character). She first meets Crimsworth when she asks the headmistress to allow her to take English classes and she becomes his student. She shares the narrator's point of view, longing to see England (where she could make a living by teaching French), to be among Protestants, who are said to be more honest than Catholics (who "think it lawful to tell lies"). She finds herself in a vicious circle with both her pupils and the adults that surround her in Belgium; she cannot stand the Catholics' tendencies towards duplicity, lies and deceit and she has a low social status in Brussels because she is a foreigner, a heretic and a mere lace-mender (and sewing, as she points out, holds no power or superiority). She feels alienated and wants to go to England where she hopes that her life will take a turn for the better. Frances is aware of the risk she would take, that she might still be isolated even if she leaves Brussels (she has no relatives or friends in England), but she claims that "I would rather submit to English pride than to Flemish coarseness"[6]. The attitude of both Crimsworth and Frances concerning those who are not of protestant English origin seem exaggerated because they point out only the flaws of Flemish women, while the Englishwomen are presented as models of perfect, ladylike behaviour. It seems that Hunsden is the only one who can show that the English society is not as perfect as they would like to believe.

As noted before, Crimsworth praises the English girls, but this does not mean that all of them were as perfect as he would like them to be. If we look at Edward's wife, we see that she is presented as lively, young and well-shaped, sporting an "infantine expression". But despite the way she looks and acts, William is disappointed to find too little intelligence in her eyes and in the way she spoke. She does not play a major role in the novel; she is the type of woman that William finds disagreeable. By using her, Brontë attacks the ideal of the perfect lady (just as she does in her other novels). She embodies the image of the perfect wife according to the norms of the patriarchal society, an image against which Brontë places her protagonists.

William Crimsworth has a negative opinion about Belgium and its people from the moment he steps foot on its soil and the ones who are criticised the most are the women. He imagines that girls from the pensionnat are angel-like and is sorely disappointed when he learns of their bold, flirtatious, inappropriate and sometimes rude attitude. We could take his word for granted, but he judges based his own ideal of a perfect woman and forgets that not all English girls are innocent. He blames the Catholic religion for the flaws of his students, while considering that the Protestant doctrine might turn them towards the right path. He is upset because of the unfair treatment Protestants receive from the Catholics, but he fails to see that he tends to act just as unfairly. Yet there is another reason for which Crimsworth cannot stand Catholicism: the fact that it demands for one to abandon their independence of thought and action and place their lives in the hands of a "despotic confessor". Louise Path finds herself in such a situation and her professor points out the fact that she had "no original opinion, no preference of companion or employment; in everything she was guided by another"[7]. It becomes clear that there is something more behind these words than only prejudice. The way Louise Path acts is the result of religious upbringing, but it can also be seen as a perfect

[6] Brontë, Charlotte. *The Professor*. London: Wordsworth Classics, 1994, p 106.
[7] *Ibidem*, p 74.

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description of women's situation in a male-dominated society (they were not to have opinions of their own; they had to obey their fathers, brothers, husbands or any other male relative for their entire lives).

It is important to pay close attention to the way the relationship between Frances and William evolves in order to observe the woman's path towards independence and if she really reaches it. They are the same in many aspects: they are both orphans, poor and alone in a foreign country, idealists in a materialistic society, Protestants among Catholics, and in the end they both move from the margin towards the centre. Just like in *Jane Eyre*, the author is supportive of the idea that a marriage should take place between equals. And yes, Frances does become somehow independent once she falls in love and decides to keep her job after she gets married (marriage that takes place only because she is an independent woman, as in the case of Jane Eyre), but it is her husband that guides her destiny. He becomes a patriarch and even though he loves Frances, she still remains (willingly) submissive to him, continuing to call him "Monsieur". It seems to go hand in hand with Brontë's opinion that "*It is natural to me to submit, and very unnatural to command*". We must not forget that the society of the nineteenth century was different from our own and we must not be blinded by the fact that Crimsworth still tends to treat his wife as if he were her teacher even after many years together. They have a happy marriage, they both work, they opened a school (it was her initiative) and, most importantly, they are equals. Most of the time we do not have access to Frances' thoughts, but we get to see from time to time that there is something else behind obedience and tranquillity. She is stronger than she seems to be and her role in life is not limited to that of a submissive wife and doting mother. Frances is independent, has a loving family and a husband that supports her decisions.

For readers today it might be difficult to understand the relationship between Frances and William; a simple example would be the way he proposes marriage, holding her on his knee... her answer is "Master, I consent to pass my life with you". Does the fact that she calls her future husband "master" mean that she is in danger of losing her identity, becoming the typical submissive wife? The answer is "no", although the risk is there. As mentioned above, her personality is more complex than what we see; such a case is noticeable in Jane Eyre's character because she is the one telling the story, but this is a different situation. Charlotte Brontë's standards were very high as far as marriage was concerned and she knew that it is not necessarily a happy institution; in her novels (with the exception of *Villette*) the only ones who enjoy a happy marriage are the protagonists. Frances and William do not marry until they are equals from every point of view, including financially. Brontë's female characters value independence too much to accept a marriage where they would feel like they are owned by their husbands. Unfortunately, it is also true that Frances did lose some of her freedom once she became a wife. She gave up her art[8], she did not write more compositions, but she refused from the very beginning to give up her job.

Crimsworth remains a professor, but Frances did not remain a dependent pupil; we see that she is actually quite an ambitious woman who valued both independence and the love of her husband. William notes that she changed after their wedding; she seems to be two different people in one (the Directress – "vigilant and solicitous" and the good and loving wife and mother) without causing a loss of identity or self-destruction. They both rebelled against the

[8] Women were not encouraged to write during the nineteenth century and Zoraïde tries at one point to make William convince Frances to focus on her social duties because "ambition, *literary* ambition especially, is not a feeling to be cherished in the mind of a woman" (*Ibidem*, p 111).

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society that did not allow them to evolve and in the end they managed to find a place where they can truly be themselves. It is only natural to imagine that their son will follow the footsteps of his parents and be his own man when he grows up.

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