

## A Thematic Study of Charlotte Brontë's; *The Professor* (1857)

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### ABSTRACT

*When the name of Charlotte Brontë is articulated nowadays, readers always bring her renowned novel "Jane Eyre" in discussion, but the aim of this paper is to focus on a different title, quite obscure when placed next to her other works: The Professor. The paper will analyze the features of The Professor and how Brontë approaches to these features throughout her career. Mainly the study will focus on the main themes of the novel, The Professor (1857). Such as Religion; its impact on Brontë's strong Christian beliefs and her attitude for patriotism as well. The paper will also highlight the theme of gender issues in The Professor and Charlotte Brontë's focus on the social aspects as well as its influence on the private side of human psyche and resulting isolation. Also how it can be crucial in changing the course of people's lives will be discussed in the present paper.*

*Key words: Charlotte Brontë, The Professor, Religion, gender issues, isolation.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Professor (1857) is the first written and last published novel of Charlotte Brontë, which embellish the seeds of the themes and concerns of her later works. That is to say the various themes which characterise the novels of Brontë were first explored in *The professor*. It was written before *Jane Eyre*; but rejected by many publishing houses and finally was published posthumously in 1857 by approval of Arthur Bell Nicholls, who accepted the task of reviewing and editing of the novel. Although it has received the least attention as compared to Brontë's other novels. Many of today's readers probably do not even know very much of its existence. However, without any doubt it has definitely set up its position in the world of literature and particularly it is an important part of Charlotte Brontë's artistic development. Also the features of *The Professor* serve as an important vehicle to see how the approach of Brontë altered right through her career towards these features. Although the novel differs in style and complexity from her remaining books, the

main themes Bronte employed in *The Professor* are to be found and revisited in *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley* and *Villette*. The most important themes of *The Professor* are touched upon, Religion, Patriotism, Social identity and Gender Issues. Charlotte Bronte explored the theme of religion as an optimistic aspects as well as the oppressive side of the church and its incapability. Her view on isolation also changed and became more important 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.

One of the recurring themes in Charlotte Bronte's novels is Religion. The strong Christian beliefs of Charlotte Bronte are not surprising; she grew up as a Parson's daughter and to some extent raised by her Calvinist aunt. Charlotte as a Protestant often manifests her dislike towards Catholicism. That is clearly evident in *The Professor* where her protagonist "Crimsworth" travels to the continent to stay in Catholic Belgium where he meets the Flammer, natives to the country. Who apiece 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" (*The Professor*)

From the above mentioned excerpt, it is clear 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. Like the German girl Aurelia Koslow is depicted to be of 'Tartar features, deplorably ignorant, slovenly and dirty', the Belgian girl Adele 'unnatural looking being of massive shape with envy and panther-like deceit about her mouth', Juanna Trista is represented as 'the precisely same shape of skull as 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'. Even in some 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” (*The Professor*, p.103).

There are also students from England in the school William Crimsworth works in and when the narrator is expressing these girls, his tenor changes spectacularly 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 *protegee* 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”.

Isolation in the world of different religion with varied principles also remains the theme of Charlotte Bronte's novels, which she later explores systematically in her novel *Villette*. However, it is also touched upon in *The Professor* although to some extent it loses its credence, because of its explicit connection with the nationalism and criticism of the Roman Catholic Church in comparison with the extol of the Protestantism. Therefore the tenor of the narrative looks more pessimistic even xenophobic at times, while Charlotte never surrender on these ideas. In her further novels where she also dedicates many passages to the criticism of different religion, she started to do so in a little different way stressing on the emotional level of her characters and their disaffection. While at the same time, she began to raise the question concerning religion in general, finding faults even in her own Protestant beliefs.

The whole narrative of the novel concentrates on the lonesome journey of its main protagonist William Crimsworth

towards achieving economic freedom and societal class as well as seeking for his own identity. He feels caged by his style of life and wants to modify it by working hard to get freedom and safety. Stevie Davies comments 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. As a result, Charlotte Bronte was able to make her protagonist's attempts and his desire for economic safety very practical and relevant. Nevertheless, it was only with her female protagonist she could explore these concerns more systematically. As a male, William already had certain rights and made his aspirations look much easier to attain. His gender dominance is especially clear when he works as a teacher in the class full of young females. As a teacher responsible for the class, he gets in position to show his own supremacy to a great number of females, which he did even when he fell for one of his students. Indeed the quote mentioned

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 disregard 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. (*The Professor*, p.126).

The desire of Crimsworth to show his dominance before women became enhanced and clearer after he got demoralized by his female boss of whose superior status he was well conscious. The



female director of the school, Mademoiselle Zoraide Reuter busy in a type of game-playing with Crimsworth when she tried to find out 'where her mind was superior' which he very much enjoys but at the same time abominates his socially poorer standing as he develops romantic sensations for her. These sensations are of a very zealous nature and arouse Crimsworth's sexual wishes which are represented by the fire which Nestor sees as a metaphor of sexual lust. However, after William finds out Zoraide is engaged to another, he starts to treat her with cold politeness and aversion managing to explain her that in spite of her superior societal status, he is still on top of her in terms of gender.

He finds a new love interest in one of his students Frances Henri, who is the accurate opposite of Reuter. So, William gets his revenge on Zoraide by making her jealous and eventually making her fall in love with him. This proves to be a great attainment for him, despite the fact he leaves the school as he does not want to get in conflict with M. Pelet, Zoraide's husband. He is capable to get a new job as a professor at a college where he receives an extremely handsome salary. Therefore, he protected his

financial independence, gets a reputable job as well as a good societal position with it and fathers a son with his young half-English wife who is at the same time obedient and humble but at the end we can get a glance of Charlotte's female protagonists in her, when she accepts 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 novel, France's also shows her disappointment with the fact she earns much less money than her husband and she is determined to do better and work harder. Her aim is to open her own school, which she finally does with her husband's permission. In France's relationship with William, we can mark out a first piece of the pattern Charlotte creates when forming literary couples. 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, passionate and arousing almost religious respect and devotion in their wives. However, Charlotte made an attempt to create a relationship based on mutuality and equality in *The Professor*. The novel itself did not get a very

positive appraisal as it was published only after Charlotte's masterpieces and compared to these; *The Professor* looked 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.

## Conclusion

Charlotte Bronte started to write and think of authorship when she was only a child engaging in plays with her siblings. She took her aim sincerely 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. Without any doubt her novels are dominated by similar strategies, which is apparent in the master and pupil relationship. *The professor* is concerned with the development of a hero, Crimsworth. Through her hero, Bronte highlights the similarities between men and women based on their inner, spiritual self rather than their sexed bodies, which societal ideology discriminates

against. The ambiguous aspects of Bronte's social commentary are also present in *The Professor*. This is apparent in the fraught gender identities which characterise all her heroes and heroines and Bronte's masking of societal ideology and its customs and principles with class and national considerations. *The Professor* examines the life of the dispossessed female in society, which Crimsworth figuratively represents and ostensibly gives voice to Charlotte Bronte's own anger and frustration. Through the male character Bronte attempts to make the plight of women more accessible to men, offering up the male Crimsworth as a gateway for empathy and awareness of issues affecting women. *The Professor* principally illustrates Bronte's desire to test and critique society's ideologies and some of its most basic assumptions. To be sure, originally titled *The Master*, *The Professor* is concerned with the issues of power in various manifestations, including gender inequality, social status, Religion beliefs, economics, superiority of character and dominion over others. As a woman of strong urge for independence and ambition, Bronte made these issues one of her main focus in her novels. However, in light of The

Professor's reception from her publishers, Bronte came to realise that "its merit...will never be owned by anybody but [herself]". Charlotte Bronte undoubtedly was a brave woman who was not afraid to address the societal issues in her work and she did it so masterfully that her novels are up to this date a representation of female strength and capability.

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