The Storyteller and the Story Told:
Charlotte Brontë as a Fictional Autobiographer
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Charlotte Brontë as a Fictional Autobiographer

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Abstract

Among Charlotte Brontë’s four full-length novels, three are composed in the form of autobiography: *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Villette* (1853), and *The Professor* (published posthumously in 1857). The abundance of first-person narratives in Brontë’s juvenile writings also highlights her marked preference for the first-person perspective in telling stories. In fact, due to the vital sense of truth inherent in first-person narration, Brontë is often identified by her readers as the heroines in her novels. This thesis aims to deal with the complex relationships of the authoress, her works, and the first-person narration. As a famous woman writer in the nineteenth century, Brontë satisfies her desire for self-expression by means of writing autobiographical fictions instead of composing her real autobiography. The first chapter examines the social and cultural contexts as well as Brontë’s personal reasons behind such a choice. There is also the discussion of Brontë’s presentation of the different characteristics of Victorian autobiographies by men and women in her novels. The second chapter investigates into Brontë’s narrative strategy, and provides answers to her insistence on first-person narration while the omniscient narration is the mainstream of novel writing. The development of Brontë’s narrative technique and her transition from the early masculine narrative to the later female discourse are also traced. The third chapter reviews the everlasting subject of Brontë’s novels—love and marriage. With a careful textual study of Brontë’s novels and a comprehensive examination of her biographical documents, I find that Brontë’s fictional hero and heroines have faithfully reflected the authoress’s real thoughts and true beliefs. As can be detected, to deliver the truth that she knows of and to influence her readers on issues that concern her most have always been Brontë’s main preoccupations in respect of novel writing.
論文摘要

在夏綠蒂勃朗蒂的四本長篇小說中，三本是用第一人稱自傳體寫成的。她的早期作品也多是採取第一人稱觀點。由此可見勃朗蒂對此一敘事觀點的偏愛。正因第一人稱敘事特有的真實感，導致勃朗蒂筆下的女主角常被讀者視為她的化身。本論文旨在探討作者、小說、與第一人稱敘事間錯綜複雜的關係。身為一名十九世紀女作家，勃朗蒂選擇寫自傳式小說來滿足自我表達的慾望，卻不撰寫她本人的真正自傳。本論文第一章即探究造成勃朗蒂此一決定的社會文化背景及其個人因素，並討論勃朗蒂在小說中呈現出的維多利亞時期男性與女性自傳的不同特徵。第二章則探討勃朗蒂偏愛第一人稱敘事觀點的理由，並指出她的小說敘事技巧的進步，及為何由早期以男性為主體的敘事轉變為後期的女性論述。第三章則討論勃朗蒂小說中始終關注的主題—愛與婚姻。將小說的文本以及作者的生平資料予以對照檢視，可以發現勃朗蒂的小說男女主角忠實的反映了作者本人的真實信念。而這也突顯了勃朗蒂寫小說的目的，即是要傳達她所相信的真理，並進而影響她的讀者。
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Introduction

Among Charlotte Brontë’s four full-length novels, three are composed in the form of autobiography: *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Villette* (1853), and *The Professor* (published posthumously in 1857). Her preference for first-person narration is more explicitly shown in the fact that after experimenting with third person omniscient narrative in *Shirley* (1849), she decided to return to her familiar, skillfully performed style when writing the next novel. If we leave out the first novel that shows the authoress’s immature technique in the early stage, *Shirley* is generally considered the less successful in comparison with *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. Andrew and Judith Hook, in their introduction to the Penguin edition of *Shirley* (1974), observe that with the reading public *Jane Eyre* has “always reigned supreme”; as for *Villette*, though not so popular as its predecessor, has “in truth often been admired by the critics.” Therefore they protest that it is *Shirley* that suffers most grievously from *Jane Eyre*’s success. Although the Hooks endeavor to justify *Shirley*’s literary merit, they recognize that *Shirley* “does not possess the kind of structural unity present in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*,” because of “lacking a consistent narrative point of view, and without a single unifying central character.”¹ Their comment chimes in with the tune of criticism about *Shirley* set forth by George Henry Lewes. In his review of *Shirley*, Lewes points out that the novel’s chief defect lies in its narrative devise—the perspective of a third-person spectator. To Lewes, this results in the novel’s lack of unity in structure, and makes the story “not quite so true” and “not so fascinating” as *Jane Eyre*.² Admittedly *Shirley* lacks the sense of reality and direct intimacy prominent in Brontë’s first-person autobiographical novels, which can usually evoke her readers’ empathy with the feelings and experiences of the heroines in her works.

In fact, Brontë has indeed displayed a marked preference for first-person narration. This preference can be traced back to her juvenile writings. Examining her existing multitudinous early writings, it can be detected that there is invariably a first-person narrator who plays the role of storyteller, eye-witness, journal reporter or contributor. It is especially evident in the Angrian saga that has occupied Brontë’s imaginary realm for about six years. In the saga, the storytellers provide comprehensive reports about the heroic deeds and love affairs of the hero in this imaginary kingdom—the Duke of Zamorna. It is notable that most of the manuscripts were signed with male pseudonyms; and, as Christine Alexander observes, where there is no signature, the narrator’s voice can “almost always be recognized in the tone of the writing and the attitude of the narrator to his characters.” Alexander hence remarks that it is “worth noting how early Charlotte shows the ability to convey the voice of a particular character.”

Although Brontë was inclined to use first-person narration in her early works, she rarely allowed her hero or heroine to tell his/her own life story directly. Zamorna, being the protagonist of the story, has little opportunity to speak to his people or to address the reader directly; his life story is mainly rendered by those who surround and observe him. This is also the case with the subsequent novelettes. However, in her later novels the narrators are no more bystanders or spectators but the soul protagonists themselves. The major difference between the narrative of Brontë’s early writings and those of her later novels lies therefore in the storyteller. In a sense, an onlooking narrator approximates a biographer who can never claim to know his or her subject’s whole mentality. What he or she reports are mainly external events and personal opinions of the subject observed. In this way the accounts are similar to romances. In contrast, a narrating protagonist is like an autobiographer who is the most qualified authority to dissect and interpret his or her own inner world. Reading Brontë’s three autobiographical fictions, the reader finds that her efforts were focused more

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on revealing the protagonists’ intellectual development and spiritual progress, than on illustrating colorful events or episodes. Such a transformation from external events to characters’ mental activities also denotes how Brontë’s literary interest has switched from the early occupation with the world of fantasy to realistic novels that explore issues of human mind and nature.

As Jerome Buckley points out, our estimate of modern literary work is more or less “conditioned by the degrees of our intimacy with the writer outside the text and by our taking for granted that his or her ‘real motive in writing at all’ was in some sort a conscious self-depiction.”4 This is also the case with many Brontë scholars, whose studies of Brontë’s novels are often influenced by the mass of documents which reveal the authoress’ s thoughts and the facts of her personal life, including her journals, manuscripts, correspondences with friends and relatives, and also accounts or memoirs from people who had personal contacts with her. In fact, Brontë’s life story has long been regarded as interwoven with her novels, which is almost inevitable since it can be proved that there are many personal autobiographical elements traceable in her novels. However, the situation has turned out to be that the reader often pays much attention to the authoress as a legendary figure but not enough to her art. Brontë’s first biographer, Mrs. Gaskell, has played a significant role in diverting the reader’s attention. Brontë’s father was disturbed by the inaccurate accounts appearing after her death, so he invited Gaskell to write a biography for Charlotte, promising her the family’s all-out cooperation and granting her the privilege of full access to Brontë’s personal documents: letters, journals, interviews with friends, and so on. Gaskell had long been fascinated with Charlotte Brontë’s life story and family, and therefore readily accepted this commitment. However, she approached her task with strong preconceptions. In a letter Gaskell clearly expressed her intention of making Brontë appear admirable: “I will

publish what I know of her and make the world... honour the woman as much as they have admired the writer.”

Being a novelist herself, Gaskell ingeniously built up a favourable new image of the woman Charlotte Brontë, as opposed to the author Currer Bell who was generally accused of the nature of “unfemininity,” “coarseness,” and “anger.” In Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Brontë emerges more as a glorified “domestic martyr” than a talented, famous novelist. Gaskell laid great stress on the pitiable aspects of Brontë’s life: her rigorous upbringing, the difficulty of family economy, her devotion to her father and siblings, the series of bereavements, and the tragedy of her own sudden death soon after her marriage. Just as expected, Gaskell successfully diverted the reader’s interest from Brontë’s writings to her life story. Since Brontë’s personal history was found to contain many of the elements of Victorian popular fiction and was also rendered by a gifted novelist, the consequence is as Catherine Malone describes, “the *Life* was treated almost as a novel itself.”

Gaskell’s biography of Charlotte Brontë proves to be a milestone in the formation of the Brontë myth. Brontë herself has been transformed successfully into a popular heroine, and critical interest tends to focus on her life rather than her works. The article in *Eclectic Review* is representative of such critical trend: “now that we have finished the strange, sad story, we have no heart for mere literary criticism... others may criticize her writings—we are unable to think of anything but her life.”

From then on, and well into the twentieth century, there has been an inexhaustible supply of this particular Brontë criticism, in which all the facts, legends and rumors about Brontë are blended inseparably together with the textual study of her fictions.

In the twentieth century, Brontë criticism was influenced by psychoanalytical approach. A lot have been said about Brontë’s sexuality and the representation of sexual repression.

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Then the feminist and post-colonial readings join in the operation of dissecting Brontë’s personality and interpreting her psychology. However, as Lucasta Miller points out in *The Brontë Myth*, most of the recent scholars are still participating in an “ongoing process of myth-making.” Their focus is still more on the authoress than her works. Therefore Miller highly praises Lyndall Gordon’s biography of Brontë, because “the facts of Charlotte’s life history are put to the service of gaining a deeper understanding of her works.”

“Gaining a deeper understanding of Brontë’s works” is also the aim of this thesis.

It was this muddle of biography and fiction that stimulated my critical interest in Brontë two years ago. My interest is therefore focused mainly on the nature of Brontë’s autobiographical fictions. Brontë’s three autobiographical novels are attributed separately to be William Crimsworth’s, Jane Eyre’s, and Lucy Snowe’s autobiography. The backgrounds and experiences of these characters are various, but the central issues that concern them most are basically the same: the pursuit of genuine love and passion, the supremacy of reason and self-control, and the predominance of intelligence and morality. These subjects of the novels, when contrasted with our knowledge about Brontë’s personal life, are found to coincide closely with what Brontë herself had been unremittingly concerned with throughout her own life. However, the discovery of such a coincidence will scarcely take the reader by surprise, because Brontë had more than once expressed that she could only write what she really understood or what she genuinely believed to be true. “Sincerity” has always been one of the most important of Brontë’s literary ideals. W. S. Williams, the reader of Brontë’s publisher, once suggested that she should try her hand at the “Condition of England” issue in order to broaden the scope of her fiction. Though highly respectful of his opinions, Brontë nevertheless replied thus: “Details—Situations ‘which’ I do not understand, and cannot personally inspect, I would not for the world meddle with . . . not one feeling, on any

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Brontë was long aware that her works suffered from “deficiencies of capacity” and “disadvantages of circumstance”; unlike Dickens and Thackeray, she neither “enjoyed facilities for observation” nor “[possessed] a knowledge of the world.” However, she pledged to do her best to deliver the truth that she knew of. She wrote: “Imperfect my best will be . . . it will be trifling—but I trust not affected or counterfeit.” In another incident Brontë again expressed her firm belief in “truth.” After reading the manuscript of Shirley’s first volume, Brontë’s publishers felt uneasy about the way she handled the Briarchapel scenes and the curates; they were worried that her open mockery and undisguised attack on Anglican clergy might incur the wrath of conventional readers. They expressed such concerns and advised her to modify those parts. But Brontë clearly showed her reluctance to withdraw the descriptions about the curates. She insisted: “it is true—The curates and their ongoings are merely photographed from the life.” In another letter to James Taylor, she explained that her “considerations” and “convictions” forbade her to “sacrifice truth to the fear of blame.”

In Brontë’s autobiographical fictions, her central hero and heroines, in their different voices, are more often than not expressing their true beliefs and real sentiments to their readers. It is therefore natural to infer that many of the expressions have actually been the authoress’s personal affections and convictions.

Yet, despite her recurrent employment of the autobiography form, Brontë did not openly explain her reasons for such a choice. Therefore in this thesis I will first discuss Brontë’s preference for and handling of the autobiographical form of fiction. In chapter one I will deal with the following questions: why did Brontë never attempt to write her own

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autobiography? How far do her fictional autobiographies follow the conventions of the genre of autobiography? And then, inasmuch as the adoption of first-person narrative perspective being the most essential characteristic structure of autobiography, in the second chapter I will investigate further into this narrative strategy. By comparing the different narrative voices of The Professor and Villette, I will examine the development of Brontë’s narrative technique and the achieved effects in her first full-length novel and her last. It is my intention to demonstrate that Brontë’s fictive discourse has faithfully reflected the real authoress’s own thoughts and convictions. To illustrate my argument further, in chapter three I will review what I believe to be the most significant issue in Brontë’s discourse—gender or the woman question; her heroines’ concerns over love, marriage, and profession. Though on the women issues Brontë has indeed advocated some ideas that are ahead of her time, yet I tend not to see in her a radical feminist, a “woman’s right” campaigner; alternatively my study is not to deny that Brontë is after all constituted in the Victorian conventional frame of mind, and to confirm that she still believes that love and marriage is what women most desire, and what women’s real happiness depends on.
Chapter I

Autobiography and Autobiographical Fiction

It has always been a difficult or even impossible task to give a clear, universally accepted definition to autobiography as a genre. Over decades scholars and critics have often engaged themselves in debates about its range, structure, and essential features. On the one hand, some of them have claimed that autobiography cannot be termed as a genre at all. Examples are given of Paul de Man in his “Autobiography as De-facement” and Avrom Fleishman in his *Figures of Autobiography*. According to de Man, the concept of genre designates an aesthetic as well as a historical function, while in the case of autobiography such a convergence of aesthetics and history is nearly impossible. “By making autobiography into a genre,” he argues, “one elevates it above the literary status of mere reportage, chronicle, or memoir and gives it a place . . . among the canonical hierarchies of the major literary genres.” He further asserts that autobiography is “not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts.”

Fleishman declares that since “[autobiography] is not generically distinguished by formal constituents, linguistic register, or audience effects,” therefore it “has no history as a genre.”

On the other hand, Georges Gusdorf has positively asserted at the very beginning of his influential essay “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography” that “Autobiography is a solidly established genre, its history traceable in a series of masterpieces from the *Confessions* of St. Augustine to Gide’s *Si le grain ne meurt*, with Rousseau’s *Confessions*, Goethe’s *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Chateaubriand’s *Mémoires d’outre tombe*, and Newman’s *Apologia* in

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3 De Man 919.
4 De Man 921.
5 Fleishman 36.
Following his lead, there are many others who dedicate themselves to the arduous task of formulating a definition of autobiography as a genre and building up an orthodox canon of representative texts. However, the first question confronting this group is their disagreement on the essential conditions of this genre. The subsequent question is the difficulty to distinguish between “genuine autobiography” and a mass of writings with close resemblance such as memoirs, essays, diaries, autobiographical poetry, and autobiographical novels.

In regard to the first question, some scholars value the simple, straightforward narration of plain facts and stress a decent quantity of verifiable information—the so-called “truth”—in scrupulously chronological order. Others, such as Roy Pascal, maintain that the most important factor of an autobiography is the sense of discovery, the display of the writer’s voyage to true understanding of his real, unique self. They believe that without such nature the product is nothing short of a failure. There are still a lot more critics who, under various influences of psychoanalytic theories, structuralism or deconstruction approach, have individually placed their emphases on different aspects of autobiography. In spite of all these scholars’ persistent efforts, still there is not a satisfactory conclusion, because each critical approach has its biases, limitations, and defects. For instance, the strictest purists insist that “an autobiography is a self-written biography designed and required to impart verifiable information about the historical subject,” which means there should be nothing else except provable facts in an autobiography. Of course such a rigid requirement is soon dismissed as an unattainable and impractical ideal. As we know, when one writes the story of one’s own life, there are inevitably a certain proportion of misrepresentations—intentional or unintentional. Even when an autobiographer is willing and vows to be completely honest

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8 Fleishman 7.
and to withhold nothing, his/her memory might fail him/her from time to time. Besides, no one can declare to know the whole truth of all the events of one’s life. It is already impossible to ask for pure truth from a conscientious autobiographer, not to mention the all-too-common circumstance that an autobiographer tends to be driven by different motives to apply concealment, omission, distortion and self-aggrandizement in his/her self-writings. These intentional misrepresentations most often take place when the autobiographer intends to attack enemies, to protect some people’s interests and reputation, or to create a perfect image of him/her for the reader to admire. Whatever the reason may be, a reader can never be certain of the truthfulness of the autobiographer’s statement. Therefore the truth criterion has to be revised. According to Fleishman, after careful revisions the scholars bring up that “the autobiographer ‘wishes to be understood’ as truthful and strives to ‘sound as truthful as possible’”; however, Fleishman acutely observes: “his actual achievement of these laudable goals wisely remains untested as a normative standard.” That is to say, though the author may repeatedly announce that under whatever situation he/she will always be absolutely honest and never falsify the facts that he/she knows of, such an announcement itself still remains unverifiable after all.

As for the difference between autobiography and autobiographical fiction, many critics have announced that autobiography is actually a kind of fiction. For example, Northrop Frye has long ago made such an observation in his masterpiece *Anatomy of Criticism*:

> Autobiography is another form which merges with the novel by a series of insensible gradations. Most autobiographies are inspired by a creative, and therefore fictional, impulse to select only those events and experiences in the writer’s life that go to build up an integrated pattern.

He suggests that this very important “form of prose fiction” can be called “the confession

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9 Fleishman 9.
form” which, with St. Augustine as its inventor, contains a lot of famous literary works including Rousseau’s *Confessions*, Browne’s *Religio Medici*, Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding*, and Newman’s *Apologia pro vita sua*.\(^{11}\) Philippe Lejeune also insists “autobiography is necessarily in its deepest sense a special kind of fiction.”\(^ {12}\) Lejeune has tackled this ineluctable problem over many years, and in the process has brought up different concepts such as “the autobiographical pact” between the writer and the reader of an autobiography, and the idea of “proper name,” in the hope of solving this puzzle. As readers we realize that the name of narrator in an autobiographical fiction is not identical with the real author’s name, and agree that we must not enforce an arbitrary reading of a fiction into its author’s real autobiography, but we can never be absolutely certain whether some revelations of sentiments and thoughts in the novel are not exactly the author’s self-writing. Just as Jerome Buckley comments, even if we “[restrict] our definition of autobiography to conscious self-revelation, we may still consider a large body of fiction designed, at least in part, to accomplish the central purpose of a ‘true’ personal narrative.”\(^ {13}\) Many novelists, poets and essayists would certainly appreciate the idea that their readers should try to understand what kind of persons they really are from nowhere else but the collections of their literary creations; at the same time, it is undeniable that in some cases the writers’ characters are indeed best presented in their opus. Therefore William C. Spengemann favours a broader definition of autobiography. He believes that autobiography is recognizable by “some evidence that the writer’s self is either the primary subject or the principal object of the verbal action.”\(^ {14}\) Writing autobiographical fiction instead of real autobiography gives an author much greater freedom in arranging the subjects he/she feels the imperative to utter. Without the bondage and commitment to stick to historical exactitude in autobiography, the

\(^{11}\) Frye 307.  
\(^{12}\) Paul Eakin points out this in his foreword to *On Autobiography*—a collection of Lejeune’s translated essays.  
\(^ {13}\) Buckley 117.  
writer can shift or invent situations and characters in order to convey his/her ideas, opinions or philosophy more faithfully and effectively; meanwhile, he/she is able to minimize the damage done to people or the awkwardness of himself/herself being publicly identified as his/her persona. Aware of these advantages of composing fictional self-writing, famous novelists such as Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce and many others have operated in this form with great ease and satisfaction. In the twentieth century, subjective autobiographical fictions have already become one of the most popular techniques of expression for novels.¹⁵

**The Male and Female Selves**

As to Brontë’s refraining from composing her own autobiography, it is the consequence of the complexities of two major factors working together: the social and cultural contexts of her time, as well as her personality and proclivity. I shall begin with the discussion about the Victorian context. In the nineteenth century, there were many external factors that discouraged women from writing conventional autobiographies following the tradition of the autobiographies by men. Just as George P. Landow points out, nineteenth-century autobiography has been commonly understood as largely a matter of “public discourse,” while women were “private creatures” who were “not supposed to have a public audience at all.”¹⁶ Therefore, in the Victorian period men seemed to dominate this genre. This can also be testified by the fact that when a new research interest in Victorian autobiography was formed in the 1980s, most scholars have laid their focus on autobiographies written by men. Popular subjects include Carlyle, Mill, Newman and Ruskin, sometimes Gosse and Trollope.¹⁷ On the other hand, some female critics, such as

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¹⁵ For further reference see Buckley, chapter 6 “Autobiographical Fiction.”


Linda H. Peterson, Valerie Sanders, and Mary Jean Corbett, have inspected autobiographies written by Victorian women. The results of their study also confirm the assumption that there was virtually no woman writing within the main (male) tradition of the spiritual autobiography. Victorian women “did not compose retrospective accounts of spiritual or psychological progress, they did not use principles or patterns derived from biblical hermeneutics to interpret their lives,” Peterson observes. Yet Peterson also stresses that rather than saying that women avoided the form of the spiritual autobiography, it is more appropriate to use the passive expression that “women were avoided by the form.”

Nevertheless, there were plenty of self-writings by women in the nineteenth century. They simply chose other modes of self-expression: memoirs, diaries, journal, autobiographical fictions, personal correspondences and so on. Sanders has made a remark that is very much to the point: the abundance of self-writings by Victorian women testifies to a “widespread preoccupation with individual experience, and a desire to communicate it, if only privately, or in a disguised form.”

As a matter of fact, early in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries women did write spiritual autobiographies. Quakers and Puritans had encouraged women to do the same thing as men did: to keep diaries in order to record and examine their own spiritual progress. But different narrative tendencies in autobiographies by men and those by women are detectable. Generally speaking, men seldom mentioned their families, wives and children in their personal records of their lives. What male autobiographers wanted to relate to the readers were their public and professional lives; they frequently engaged themselves in lengthy discussions of historical events and contemporary incidents, and in reasoning about religious and philosophical questions. Whereas women’s emphases were fixed on personal matters: the process of courtship, their parents, husbands, children, friends and domestic

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19 Sanders 3.
experiences. Estelle Jelinek holds accordingly that the different traditions of autobiography by women and that by men began to be established in the seventeenth century. She demonstrates that there is the recurrent image of identity throughout autobiographies written by women. “In contrast to the self-confident, one-dimensional self-image that men usually project,” she argues, “women often depict a multidimensional, fragmented self-image colored by a sense of inadequacy and alienation, of being outsiders or ‘other.’” In addition, Jelinek also notes that the style of autobiographies by women is much alike: the narratives are generally “episodic and anecdotal, nonchronological and disjunctive,” which are in sharp contrast to men’s typical progressive and linear ones.20

Certainly, Victorian women’s concentration on “domestic experiences” and “personal problems” had much to do with their social status. The Industrial Revolution contributed to the emergence of middle class and urbanization; the division of productive labor between men and women of a family in the early rural society was no longer of necessity for the new industrialized society. Brewing and weaving had once been women’s work in domestic production, but gradually in the big cities these tasks were taken over by professional male workers. On the one hand, men were able to earn enough money to support their families so that women in their households no longer needed to share the financial responsibility—this satisfied masculine self-pride greatly as the family’s sole breadwinner; on the other hand, men certainly would not wish women to compete with them for job opportunities in the work market. Under such a social environment, the opinion leaders, with clergymen and conduct book writers as their head, started to promote the doctrine that men and women belong to “separate spheres.” Hannah More and William Cowper, two eighteenth-century Evangelical writers, had a great influence on the common definition of domesticity and sexual difference. They were followed in the nineteenth century by a group

of ardent disciples (especially women) who wrote a lot on how those values could be translated into patterns and practiced in daily life by women in their homes. With those writers’ joint efforts, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall note in *Family Fortunes*, by the 1830s and 1840s “the belief in the natural differences and complementary roles of men and women which had originally been particularly linked to Evangelicalism had become the common sense of the English middle class.”

Women were believed to be of a tender and sympathetic nature, which made them the most suitable caretakers; hence the arena where they could best exercise their natural talents would be the household. A man had his bitter struggles in the outside material world; he needed to return to an orderly home full of warmth, love, and domestic comforts for replenishment and sustenance of his energy and spirit. This could not be done without a good housekeeper, and therefore a man would need a diligent woman to supervise housekeeping, to rear and educate children, and to ensure that when he came home there would always be a warm fire and good food awaiting him, be her a wife, a mother, or a single sister. In this way, a woman was earnestly exhorted to remain at home and be an “angel in the house” in order to provide all the necessary services to her family members.

The most precious feminine virtues are thoughtfulness, submission, modesty, and self-denial, as preachers and writers of advice books and novels promote untiringly through their lectures and works with great enthusiasm.

In the Victorian period, a woman’s real happiness was believed to exist in her unselfish dedication to her kindred’s welfare. She was traditionally charged with the noble mission to construct her home into a barricade against the vicious material world as well as an educational establishment to nourish the moral sense and proper personality of her child. It is understandable how Victorian women were often dissuaded from the pursuit of

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22 “The Angel in the House” was the title of Coventry Patmore’s long poem, composed between 1854 and 1862. As Richard D. Altick explains, it was a “hugely popular versified praise of domestic sainthood and the mystical, non-fleshly institution of marriage.” See Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas* (New York: Norton, 1973) 53.
self-accomplishment in the public field. Women received hardly any encouragement to develop their own careers because that would inevitably result in negligence of their vocational duties as the providers of domestic service. If ill luck deprived a woman of a male protector—father, husband, or brother—and thus forced her to work for living or supporting her family, she had to consider her work as a sort of “necessary evil.” She must not cultivate the least degree of vanity or self-satisfaction about her ability of making money. Besides, men usually felt great unease about women’s independence, no matter sexual, intellectual or economical, because independent women threatened to share men’s prerogatives. This was another reason that prevented Victorian women from writing spiritual autobiographies of male tradition.

As mentioned before, Victorian male autobiographers generally laid emphasis on their professional achievements and their intellectual or spiritual progress. Their approaches were one-dimensional and self-centered, therefore liable to the disadvantages of excessive egotism. That explains why autobiography by men was traditionally in an apologetic mode. Valerie Sanders indicates that even the reputed male writers like John Stuart Mill and Anthony Trollope sometimes “felt the need to apologize for obtruding themselves and their concerns on the public.” Yet she further stresses that, on the whole, the public “was more ready to accept these obtrusions from famous men than from famous women.”23 While egotism is a moral defect to men, it is conceived as an inexcusable sin to women. If a Victorian woman writer was bold enough to elaborate on her achievements—professional, spiritual, or intellectual—or to sound defiant and hardened about her own causes and convictions, she had better prepare herself for the fiercest attacks on her vanity, conceit, and insidious egotism. Often she would be blamed for being “unfeminine.” This may explain the reason why in the Victorian Age many famous women writers found the idea of composing personal autobiographies horrible and distasteful. George Eliot is a famous

23 Sanders 7.
example. After reading Harriet Martineau’s autobiography, in letters to her friends Eliot has more than once expressed her disapproval of the act of writing autobiographies. In a letter to John Blackwood, Eliot mentioned first her appreciation of those fragments on Martineau’s childhood and early youth, but the good words were shortly offset by the declaration that Martineau’s accounts about the value of her writings were unbearable. Eliot writes:

> When she has to tell about her writings and what others said and did concerning them, the impression on me was one of shuddering vexation with myself that I had ever said a word to anybody about either compliments or injuries in relation to my own doings. But assuredly I should not write such things down to be published after my death.\(^{24}\)

In another letter to Sara Hennell, Eliot pronounces her repugnance to this literary genre more clearly:

> The more I think of the book and all connected with it, the more it deepens my repugnance—or, rather, creates a new repugnance in me—to autobiography, unless it can be so written as to involve neither self-glorification nor impeachment of others.\(^{25}\)

To Eliot, the parts in Martineau’s autobiography that she dislikes are simply those when the writer “has to tell of her own triumphs.” She considers it acceptable that Martineau reports her intercourse with other distinguished people, but she regrets that Martineau goes as far as to “pronounce upon their entire merits and demerits, especially when, if she had died as soon as she expected, these persons would nearly all have been living to read her gratuitous rudenesses.”\(^{26}\)

In all, Eliot’s primary objections to autobiography are directed at the autobiographers’


\[^{26}\text{Selections from George Eliot’s Letters 483-84.}\]
excessive absorption in themselves and the unreserved personal judgments on their contemporaries. If to praise one’s own triumphs and to express arbitrary criticism against others were considered in opposition to the ideal of femininity, then, how could Victorian women writers satisfy their desires for self-expression and meanwhile not undermine their reputations for being perfectly feminine? Mary Jean Corbett notes that many of them had adopted some strategies to reach a compromise. She declares that female autobiographers had tried to “legitimate their entrance into ‘public discourse’ by invoking the norms of private-sphere femininity as their warrant for undertaking literary and self-representational work.”

Some of them, such as George Eliot herself and Charlotte Brontë, wrote novels with many autobiographical elements; others just entrusted their friends or relatives to edit and publish their letters, diaries, or journals. Most of the women from upper or upper-middle class preferred to entitle their autobiographies as “memoirs,” “recollections,” “reminiscences” or “records.” Even those who were prominent in their professional domain or enjoyed high social status tended to eschew the formal generic term. As to the subtle aptness of their wording, Valerie Sanders demonstrates lucidly how those women writers were especially attracted to the label “recollections”:

Recollections] suggest something casual, easy, unstructured, resembling family stories at the fire side . . . Moreover, they are usually about other people. The speaker is often no more than a reporter of outmoded practices, funny experiences, or impressions of the great and famous, and her audience’s attention is focused on the told, rather than on the teller. “Recollections,” too, follow their own process of association, an inner logic that need not be justified and explained.

These female autobiographers shifted their focus from the traditional center of

28 Sanders 6.
autobiography—a full portrait of the self—to the illustration of contemporary celebrities and anecdotes about them. In this way, they could successfully satisfy the public’s appetite for the private lives of the big names to which they had little access, and also tactfully avoid the danger of appearing egotistic or arbitrary. There is another implicit advantage to this approach. In relating to people in her circle, the writer could conveniently provide narratives about her self through indirect accounts and description by the way of, for example, copying down her friends’ letters to her which contained their viewpoints—or even compliments—of her, or subtly pointing out the important role she had played in contribution to her husband’s career success. With these schemes and designs a female autobiographer was able to delicately and efficiently transmit her desirable self-image to her readers. Contrary to her contemporary male autobiographers’ persistence in the generic patterns, a Victorian female autobiographer was generally careless about men’s rigid prerequisites such as a linear, progressive narrative, serious reflection, analysis, and criticism of the writer’s self. This usually results in an account of her life somewhat fragmented and digressive, but more intimate, informal, and lifelike.

Apart from these historical factors that prevent Victorian women from writing autobiographies of men’s convention, Brontë has personal reasons for not writing her own autobiography. Brontë has an inveterate distaste for self-revelation. Due to her extreme shyness, Brontë always felt ill at ease when she was surrounded by strangers, and she had always resented unnecessary publicity and public exposure. Hence when her first published novel became a great success, she strongly demanded her publishers’ cooperation in keeping herself anonymous. As a matter of fact, she had even kept her true identity a secret from her publishers for almost a whole year after sending them the manuscript of *Jane Eyre*. She might have fain remained undisclosed had it not been the rumored confusion of her and the
sisters’ separate identities as one. But she still managed to detain the inescapable exposure to the reading public for one year longer. Fame she had never cherished; during her visits to London, though excited with the opportunities to meet those literary figures she had long worshipped and to broaden her vision, she inevitably suffered from her sense of discomposure and embarrassment in the company of strangers who were curious about her, though she was clearly aware of their admiration for her. In addition to her inherent bashfulness, Brontë loathed to display her private life and personal feelings to the unrelated public. Before the publication of *Shirley*, her publishers suggested that she should consider the possibility of mentioning in her preface the pang she has suffered in the deaths of Ellis and Acton Bell—her two endeared sisters. On this suggestion Brontë replied a strong veto. She gave her reasons in a letter to W. S. Williams in August 1849:

I can shed no tears before the public, nor utter any groan in the public ear. The deep, real tragedy of our domestic experience is yet terribly fresh in my mind and memory. It is not a time to be talked about to the indifferent; it is not a topic for allusion to in print . . . I have always felt certain that it is a deplorable error in an author to assume the tragic tone in addressing the public about his own wrongs or griefs. What does the public care about him as an individual? . . . What we deeply feel is our own—we must keep it to ourselves.

Brontë chose to mourn her sisters in a more private and implicit form—poetry. She wrote two elegies respectively on the deaths of Emily and Anne: “My darling, thou wilt never know” for Emily (24 Dec. 1848), and “There’s little joy in life for me” for Anne (21 Jun. 1849). She scorned to win her readers’ compassion with her personal tragedy, and she believed that an author’s private life belonged to him/her and should subject to no pryer’s

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examination. Even though she knew that her sisters’ characters might be “speculated upon,” “misunderstood,” or “misrepresented” by the curious readers, still she would rather leave them in quiet mystery than speak up to clarify their image or to evoke people’s favorable feelings for them. It is therefore hard to imagine that such a Charlotte Brontë could have much interest in writing a personal record of her own domestic experiences and inward feelings. Alternatively, she chose to write novels in the autobiographical mode.

**Toward Brontë’s Fictional Autobiographies**

Bearing in mind the diverse attributes and features of autobiographies written by Victorian men and women, when we study Charlotte Brontë’s autobiographical novels, we feel there is the sense that she had acutely noticed and distinctly conveyed this differentiation in her works. In *The Professor*, the male autobiographer William Crimsworth has placed the focus singularly on his self from the beginning till the end. He never considers it necessary to appear in low profile; on the contrary, he is more than willing to display the preeminence of his intelligence and character, his superior taste, and his quickness in taking action. As the story begins, he refuses to marry his pretty cousin for money and connection and determines to fight his battle of life empty-handedly and rely on nobody to make his fortunes. His brother has become a prosperous mill owner because of his union with the ex-possessor’s daughter, but William will go the different way. Physical beauty and charm of women are irresistible to the majority of men, but they do not have that fatal attraction to him. Though in the prime of youth, he announces his difference from other men in maintaining that a girl in possession of soul, reason and intelligence is the most precious treasure to him. He feels good about himself in choosing Frances Henri as his wife, despite the fact that Frances is a poor girl without any relation in this world, and that she is physically unattractive—she has “sad eye,” “pale cheek,” “dejected and joyless countenance,” and is neither robust nor

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vigorously. But Crimsworth has thus confessed to his readers:

I had been accustomed to nurse a flattering idea that my strong attachment to her proved some particular perspicacity in my nature; she was not handsome, she was not rich, she was not even accomplished, yet was she my life’s treasure; I must then be a man of peculiar discernment. (The Professor 209, italics mine)

The way Crimsworth expresses his complacency about his “natural perspicacity” and “peculiar discernment,” that is, through enumeration of his fiancée’s defects, points to certain dark constituents in his personality and hardly makes him more venerable to his readers. But he is a true, typical male autobiographer who concentrates on his own conscience and judgment exclusively; he does not care much about what his readers may think of him just as he never tries to guess or explore other characters’ thoughts or minds in this book of his personal life. After their engagement kiss that is also their first, Crimsworth and Frances both remain silent for a long time, and Crimsworth thus admits: “Frances’ thoughts during this interval, I know not, nor did I attempt to guess them” (The Professor 207). He privately wishes her to feel the peace that he feels, but what she is really pondering in her mind is of no interest to him.

Another occasion demonstrates more clearly the autobiographer’s reluctance to waste his time on the investigation of other people’s mentality, and that is a common phenomenon in autobiographies by men. On their wedding day, when Crimsworth picks up Frances he finds that she has been crying. He recollects:

When I asked her if she were ready she said “Yes, Monsieur,” with something very like a checked sob; and when I . . . folded [a shawl] round her, not only did tear after tear course unbidden down her cheek, but she shook to my ministrations like a reed. I said I was sorry to see her in such low spirits and requested to be allowed an insight into the origin thereof.
She only said “It was impossible to help it.” (*The Professor* 226)

He then reports that Frances hurried with him down stairs with a quick, uncertain step, “like one who was eager to get some formidable piece of business over” (*The Professor* 226). We can agree with his remark that Frances’ behavior and emotion were “singular” on a day when she was supposed to be most joyous; but what is even more extraordinary is Crimsworth’s lack of interest to urge for a clear explanation from her. Similarly, in his book Crimsworth never feels the need to relate to his readers what Mdlle. Reuter might have felt about his purposeful rudeness and coldness toward her. He introduces his methods and principles in disciplining his only son, but what his son feels about them is not in his consideration. He is concerned solely with his thoughts, his talents, his feelings and his way, because those are the only parts which the readers of his autobiography are supposed to be interested to know. But even so there are still some intentional concealment and omissions revealed. Hunsden accuses him of being hypocritical in proposing to Frances because his motive in doing so is simply to prove his disdain of social distinction, and he tries to provoke Crimsworth by depreciating Frances’ moral value and appearance. But Crimsworth neither attacks Hunsden for his contemptible language about Frances nor defends his own cause in marrying her. He faithfully reports their quarrel, their words and their fight, but reveals nothing about what he really thinks about Hunsden’s remarks. As for his serious outbreak of hypochondria right after settling his engagement with Frances, he touches on it lightly and mentions that it has happened to him before in a way that makes these outbreaks seem minor and trivial. We understand that by doing so he tries to reduce the seriousness and significance of this episode. But it only appears more abnormal and unreasonable that a man should leave such crucial events without interpretation at all in a book supposed to be about the most important events in his life.

As for *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, the situations are quite different. These two autobiographical novels display many characteristics of Victorian autobiography by women.
A large part of these two autobiographies belongs to a detailed portrayal of people in their lives: their looks, their outfits, their speech, their carriage and demeanor. Besides that, the two female autobiographers make subjective conjectures on people’s thoughts and characters, and freely vent their personal comments and impeachment on those people. When it is necessary to depict their own appearances or dresses their words are curt and brief, and the language they assume is usually depreciatory. When it seems unavoidable to mention their professional achievements, they hurriedly skip the part of their hard work and devotion, but accredit their success to people’s (especially men’s) encouragement, support and instruction to them. As in the finale of *Villette* readers learn about Lucy’s success in running and expanding her school, but she declares clearly that things will not be so prosperous but for M. Paul, the man who gives her all the motives, energies and power for sustenance. Lucy writes: “The secret of my success did not lie so much in myself, in any endowment, any power of mine, as in a new state of circumstances, a wonderfully changed life, a relieved heart” (*Villette* 594). Lucy’s modest confession in part reduces the risk of general readers’ antagonism to a successful career woman, at the same time highlights her femininity in relation to her beloved man.

However, it is worth noticing that there are also some fragments in the two female autobiographies that resemble a lot the spiritual autobiography of men’s tradition. Avrom Fleishman in his *Figures of Autobiography* has treated Augustine’s *Confessions* as the prototype and thence deduced from it six classic Christian motifs as the characteristics of spiritual autobiography: natural childhood, fall and exile, wandering-journey-pilgrimage, the crisis, epiphany and conversion, and renewal and return. As discussed earlier, Victorian women seldom dealt with these motifs in their self-writing, so it is a surprise to find these motifs prominent in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. Jane’s autobiography begins with her miserable childhood as an unloved dependent, followed by her exile from home to a school of the worst

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33 Fleishman 58-67.
living condition where she suffers abuse and mistreatment from male patriarch. She has experienced religious crisis when witnessing injustices done to the innocent and the righteous. But the greatest crisis in her life is the seduction to commit bigamy (or adultery) from the man she deeply loves. She is nearly tempted by him to become his mistress, but is awakened by a last-minute epiphany—the work of supernatural power or her own conscience. Jane bravely eludes the temptation and thence preserves both Rochester’s and her own integrity and reputation. The following part, nearly one fourth of the whole story, is about Jane’s exploration of her own heart and mind, her reasoning on the difference between true love and veneration, and the meaning and value of religious devotion and women’s self-denial. We see her wandering despondently in the wilderness, on the verge of dying of starvation and hardship. In her ordeal and while under tremendous mental torture, Jane constantly speaks to God and asks for guidance. She also exploits biblical allusions abundantly. Then we witness her coming to terms eventually with her bitter, hateful past; we trace the development and progress of her intellect and spirit; and in the finale of her story we see her returning to Rochester and their happy consummation. By this time Jane has turned into a mature, forgiving, intelligent, and lenient woman. She is finally in a so-called “equal position” to her husband: she has become his “vision” his “right hand,” and his soul mate. This kind of parallel relationship may be given different interpretations, for example, if assessed by the feminist critics of later generations; but I shall demonstrate in the third chapter of this thesis that this kind of marital relationship is already the most hoped-for situation for Charlotte Brontë—a Victorian woman within her context.

In *Villette*, Lucy Snowe does not have as many dramatic and colorful life experiences as Jane does, but her autobiography is even more prominently about her own heart and thoughts. Lucy has opinions and judgments on almost every person and every incident in her life circle. In sharp contrast to the male autobiographer William Crimsworth, Lucy is interested not only in the development of her own psychology, but also spends a lot of time in
portraying, analyzing and interpreting other people’s appearances, characters, tastes and proclivities. She presents both their strengths and weaknesses fair and square. Reading Lucy’s autobiography, we get to know that she is first attracted to Dr. John by the handsomeness of his look and carriage, but she gradually grows sensible to their incompatibility in temperament and personality, and realizes that she and Dr. John are not meant for each other. We also learn about how in the beginning she detests M. Paul due to lack of understanding and communication, and how with the accumulation of mutual understandings she finally falls in love with his mind, soul, tenderness and constancy. We witness Lucy’s transformation from a diffident woman who strictly represses her affections to a brave warrior who is willing to defy any rule or obstacle that stands in her way to her true love. Lucy’s defiance reminds us of Brontë’s defensive reply to Harriet Martineau’s sharp criticism on her handling of love in Villette: “I know what love is as I understand it; and if man or woman should be ashamed of feeling such love, then there is nothing right, noble, faithful, truthful, unselfish in this earth.”34 As regards the allusions to Bible, though in her autobiography Lucy does not cite the Scriptures as often as Jane does, yet readers are more clearly informed of Lucy’s attitudes and concepts with respect to theological issues such as fate, destiny, earthly injustice and God’s will. The detailed and comprehensive descriptions of the heroines’ psychological evolvement and intellectual improvement in Jane Eyre and Villette indicate that the two female autobiographical fictions have overtaken The Professor, the one attributed to be a man’s autobiography; they are much closer to male spiritual autobiography both in form and in spirit.

Northrop Frye, in his discussion of the motive that drives an author to write his own confession, states:

> Nearly always some theoretical and intellectual interest in religion, politics, or art plays a leading role in the confession. It is his success in

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integrating his mind on such subjects that makes the author of a confession feel his life is worth writing about.\textsuperscript{35}

In Brontë’s case, though she often gives her opinions on religion, politics, and art, the greatest aspect of her “theoretical and intellectual interest” still lies in the conditions of women: love, education, choice of profession, feminine virtues, aspects of marriage, women’s status in society, and so on. From her novels, especially those of which the central figure is a woman, readers can see how the authoress repeatedly ponders over and reasons about these issues. In my opinion, Brontë’s novels faithfully and accurately reflect her mind and collectively represent the integration of different stages of her life. This is vividly demonstrated in \textit{Villette}. As the narrative unfolds, Brontë adroitly presents the heroine’s evolvement of mind, discovery of true self, and eventually her success in integrating her mind. Through Lucy, Brontë expresses her opinions regarding women’s self-renunciation promoted by the society. At the beginning of the story, Lucy can be regarded as the embodiment of feminine self-restraint and self-denial. She forbids herself from indulging in the pursuit of love and happiness, and admonishes herself to be thankful for an uninteresting but somehow calm, uneventful life. However, originally a negativist of her own affections, Lucy has been converted into someone who is not afraid to recognize love and fight against any malevolent force. It is the steadfast belief in the sublimity of true love that brings forth Lucy’s conversion. The following chapter will explore further into how the process of Lucy’s conversion is meticulously demonstrated along the evolution of the narrative.

\textsuperscript{35} Frye 308.
Chapter 2
Narration and Meaning

A prominent characteristic of Charlotte Brontë’s writing is the abundance of first-person narratives. Except in a few rare cases, her juvenile writings, novelettes, and full-length novels have shown that she obviously favors this particular point of view in telling her stories. Interestingly, after the great popularity of *Jane Eyre*, Brontë chose not to utilize the familiar model of first-person autobiographical mechanism, but instead employed omniscient narration in the subsequent fiction *Shirley*. However, as critics (such as George Henry Lewes) find out, such a narrative strategy is not her specialty. Undoubtedly Brontë herself has recognized the fact, so in *Villette*, the novel put forth three years after the publication of *Shirley*, she practically returned to the first-person autobiographical form.

**First-person vs. Omniscient: Historical Evaluation**

There are historical elements and personal reasons contributing to Brontë’s recurrent exercise of first-person narration. But before one investigates how Brontë comes to favor and specialize in first-person narration, it may be helpful to make a brief survey of the two different narrative perspectives—first-person and omniscient—and their relative merits and critical evaluations. Although it is generally acknowledged that the novel as a literary genre has evolved from first-person narrative presentations such as diaries, epistles, confessions, travelogues and sermons of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, yet ironically in the old days first-person narration was sometimes considered an awkward and less effective technique in novel writing. In fact, the history of is being regarded as an inferior literary technique can be traced back to the ancient Greek and Roman periods. According to Scholes and Kellogg, authors of the historical works of pre-Roman period always employ
third-person narrative because they believe that a detached, objective third-person narrator is more reliable than a one-sided eye-witness.¹ As for Greek romance, though there is a prodigious number of works using first-person narration, yet the author-narrator would never claim to have been an eye-witness to or a participant in the event he is narrating.² “For the most part,” Scholes and Kellogg remark, “these fictions are content to be fictional, without striving for either verisimilitude or authenticity.”³

As time moved on to the nineteenth century, in 1804, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, the well-known literary critic, dismissed first-person narration as “the least perfect mode of any,” although she credited the first-person narrative with the advantages of both “warmth” and “a greater air of truth.” The reasons for her dissatisfaction with the first-person narration are as follows: first of all, it “confines the author’s stile (sic) . . . to the supposed talents and capacity of the imaginary narrator”; secondly, a first-person narrator could not possibly give detailed, truthful accounts of what have happened at the early stage of his life “at the close of a long life.” And moreover,

The author has all along two characters to support, for he has to consider how his hero felt at the time of the events to be related, and how it is natural he should feel them at the time he is relating them; at a period, perhaps, when curiosity is extinguished, passion cooled, and when . . . the suspense which rendered them interesting is over.⁴

And in 1868 the novelist Anthony Trollope also conceived it a “dangerous” practice to write from the point of ‘I’ because, if not well-rendered, the reader would easily feel disgusted: “The reader is unconsciously taught to feel that the writer is glorifying himself, and rebels against the self-praise. Or otherwise the ‘I’ is pretentiously humble, and offends from exactly

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² Scholes and Kellogg 244.
³ Scholes and Kellogg 245.
the other point of view."\(^5\)

There are certainly serious limitations inherent in a first-person narrative. The narrator’s vision is restricted: he cannot see or know everything; he has access to only one mind—his own; he suffers inevitably from bias and prejudice due to limited knowledge and personal involvement. In contrast an omniscient narrator has almost all the advantages to him, namely: “familiarity with all the characters’ innermost thoughts and feelings; knowledge of past, present and future; presence in locations where characters are supposed to be unaccompanied . . . and knowledge of what happens in several places at the same time.”\(^6\)

An omniscient narrative allows an author a lot more freedom. Since there is nothing he should not know of or could not tell of, it also becomes a great challenge to the author’s ability and skill. In view of compositional freedom and intellectual challenge, the major Victorian novelists tended to prefer the convention of omniscience. I have conducted an investigation on the fictional narrative perspective employed by Thackeray, Dickens, Trollope, George Eliot, and Hardy in their works. Except for Trollope (out of his forty-seven novels, I have surveyed twenty-four of them), the other authors’ major novels have all been included. In Thackeray’s case, out of his eight works there is only one written in first-person perspective. Respectively, in Trollope there is one out of twenty-four; in Eliot, one out of nine; Dickens has adopted first-person narration in three novels, but in one of them (Bleak House) he actually employs both first-person and omniscient perspective; in Hardy, there is not a single first-person narrator. The result of my survey shows that these famous novelists of the nineteenth century have indeed favored the omniscient perspective.\(^7\)

Therefore J. Hillis Miller, in his criticism of the writings of Thackeray, Dickens, Trollope, George Eliot, Meredith and Hardy, pronounces decisively that the omniscient narrator is “the


\(^7\) For more details of this survey, please see Appendix.
most important constitutive convention for the form of Victorian fiction.” In his opinion, the characteristic work of each of these famous novelists comes into existence only “when he chooses to play the role not of a first person narrator . . . but the role of a collected mind.”

In this way, Brontë’s preference for first-person narration seems to go against the tide of contemporary literary taste.

While there was the common opinion in favour of the omniscient narration, first-person narration had nevertheless enjoyed a much higher regard in the eighteenth century. It was a period “just developing the modern yearning for the actual,” and Scholes and Kellogg consider it natural that “autobiography should flourish, and . . . writers as different as Defoe and Richardson should go to great lengths to present their fictions in the form of actual autobiographical documents.” It is because the author of a fictional eye-witness narrative wants to “acquire for his narrative some of that passion for actuality which motivates the reader of any document that purports to contain the ‘real.’” As a matter of fact, Scholes and Kellogg hold that first-person narration is the natural form of mimetic literature: “Circumstantiality, verisimilitude, and many more of the qualities which we recognize as identifying characteristics of realism in narrative are all natural functions of the eye-witness point of view.” To sum up, the force of first-person narratives was not completely ignored and the development was compelled by some experimental spirits and functional yields. In 1785, one of the earliest theorists of the novel, Clara Reeve, highlighted the indispensable element of realism of the novel in contrast to the romance:

The Romance is an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and

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8 J. Hillis Miller, The Form of Victorian Fiction (Cleveland: Arete, 1979) 11.
9 Miller 63. Miller is not the only critic of the twentieth century who believes that the most effective narrator is a third person. Many others also express a similar attitude, such as Henry James, Joseph Warren Beach, Percy Lubbock, Kathleen Tillotson, Louis D. Rubin, and so on. For reference please see Manette Reinitz Berlinger, introduction, “First Person Singular: Narration and Meaning in the Novels of Charlotte and Emily Brontë,” diss., New York U, 1996.
10 Scholes and Kellogg 257.
11 Scholes and Kellogg 257.
12 Scholes and Kellogg 250.
things.—The Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the
times in which it is written. The Romance in lofty and elevated
language, describes what never happened nor is likely to happen.—The Novel gives a familiar relation of such things, as pass
every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friends, or
ourselves; and the perfection of it, is to represent every scene, in so
easy and natural a manner, and to make them appear so probable, as to
deceive us into a persuasion . . . that all is real, until we are affected by
the joys or distresses, of the persons in the story, as if they were our
own.13

The early part of the nineteenth century has a closer affinity to the late eighteenth century
than to the later Victorian period, including the general opinions about the aim and effect that
a fiction should aspire to achieve. The demand for reality in fiction was growing. Frances
Trollope, a contemporary novelist, begins her novel One Fault (1840) with a statement which
best anticipates Brontë’s plan for The Professor: “The persons of the story I am about to tell
were neither of high rank, nor of distinguished fashion . . . Ordinary every day human beings,
and ordinary every day events are my theme . . . they shall be such men and women as I have
seen and known.”14 Brontë must have been overwhelmed by similar literary ethos, so that
she compelled herself to get over her original taste for the elaborate and florid romance (her
Angrian saga), “the ornamented and redundant in composition” (in her own words), and
made up her mind that she should henceforth dedicate to the writing of “what was plain and
homely.”15 Brontë’s commitment to realism is nevertheless steadfast. “Novelists should
never allow themselves to weary of the study of real Life” (The Professor 147), her fictional
author/narrator William Crimsworth announces at the beginning of chapter nineteen of The

13 Clara Reeve, The Progress of Romance, vol. 1 (1785), rpt. in Novelists on the Novel 47.
15 Charlotte Brontë, preface, The Professor 1.
Professor, and it seems a mission statement of Brontë’s own literary conviction.

**Brontë’s Preference for First-person Narration: Socio-cultural and Personal Elements**

“Verisimilitude” is the principal merit of first-person narration that makes it so attractive to Brontë. Such a narrative, if practiced with success, can generally engender a “sense of truth” in the reader in spite of its inherent limitations. When readers feel the narrator’s (or the author’s) sincerity, they tend to believe that the first-person narrator is the impersonation of a real person, what he/she narrates are genuine feelings and real events based on his/her own experiences. Furthermore, readers are inclined to share the narrator’s joys and pains, sympathize with the narrator’s deeds and thoughts, and therefore turn into the narrator’s allies morally and emotionally; they would accept his/her opinions, comments, conviction, and moralizations as authoritative, and they might eventually identify with the narrator. Such an effect must have been most congenial to Brontë, in that she did not write novels simply to entertain her readers. As is known, among the three sisters Charlotte was the one who was most enthusiastic about becoming a professional novelist. She was the only sister who followed her brother Branwell’s step in voluntarily seeking professional advice from famous literati; it was also she who took the initiative in persuading her sisters to publish their poems and searching for publishers.\(^{16}\) As Susan Lanser puts it, “regardless of any woman writer’s ambivalence toward authoritative institutions and ideologies, the act of writing a novel and seeking to publish it . . . is implicitly a quest for discursive authority: a quest to be heard, respected, and believed, a hope of influence.”\(^{17}\) It is also Brontë’s wish to influence or even “educate” her readers in forming opinions regarding certain issues which concern her most, which are the difficult situations of tutors and governesses, and the agony

\(^{16}\) For reference please see Gaskell, chap. 8 and 14.  
and helplessness of single females. To her, it seems that the most effective way to arouse the reader’s compassion for people of those lots is to make those characters speak directly to the reader. In a word, the commitment to realism and the determination to influence have constituted a great part of the reasons for Brontë’s preference for first-person narration.

In regard to Brontë’s personal reasons for her inclination toward first-person narration, there are several aspects to be explained. The first one is the prevalent narrative form of the eighteenth-century novels and those novels’ literary influence on Brontë. According to Scholes and Kellogg’s study of the history of narrative, a majority of the widely-read English novels of the eighteenth century are written in the eye-witness form: “most of Defoe’s, Richardson’s, Sterne’s, Smollett’s and Fanny Burney’s original fictions are cast in eye-witness form, either retrospective or the immediate form of letters and journals.”

They further note that the first-person narrator is actually the mainstream of fictional narrative strategy in the eighteenth century, while the omniscient narrator (or “histor” in their jargon) only comes to be dominant until the nineteenth century: “the simple, reliable eye-witness dominates realism from Lazarillo into the eighteenth century, and the complex, omniscient histor, foreshadowed by Cervantes and Fielding, belongs to . . . the nineteenth century.”

In this case, Brontë’s obvious fondness for and recurrent adoption of first-person narration make her conspicuously distinct from the other novelists of her time. We have reasons to believe that the prevalent narrative strategy of the eighteenth century has exerted an influence much stronger than that of the nineteenth century on Brontë’s writing. In her early years, though her father encouraged the children to cultivate the habit of reading, on account of their poverty they could hardly afford to buy many new books. Although Mrs. Gaskell says that the Brontë children were allowed to get books from the circulating library at

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18 Scholes and Kellogg 267.
19 Scholes and Kellogg 274.
Keighley.\textsuperscript{20} Tom Winnifrith argues quite convincingly the opposite that Mrs. Gaskell might be referring misleadingly to the library of the Keighley Mechanics’ Institute.\textsuperscript{21} Mr. Brontë was known to be a subscriber to this library. Libraries of Mechanics’ Institutes were full of improving literature but rather weak on the supply of contemporary new novels, which reversely constituted a large portion of a circulating library’s book list. Mrs. Gaskell acknowledges that new novels were given to Charlotte Brontë only after she became famous, mainly by her publishers,\textsuperscript{22} and this fact is testified by Brontë herself in her correspondence with the publishers. Therefore it can be inferred that, except for those novels serialized in the magazines that their father subscribed to or borrowed from friends, the Brontë children in their early years had little access to nineteenth-century fiction. On the other hand, Charlotte Brontë’s familiarity with several eighteenth-century novels is confirmed in the draft of her letter to Hartley Coleridge.\textsuperscript{23} In this draft, Brontë relates to Samuel Richardson’s novels: \textit{Sir Charles Grandison}, \textit{Pamela}, and \textit{Clarissa}; besides, she also mentions Fanny Burney’s \textit{Evelina}, Charlotte Smith’s \textit{Ethelinde, or the Recluse of the Lake}, and Mrs. Radcliffe’s works. Therefore we could not rule out the possibility that the prevalent first-person narration of eighteenth-century fiction might indeed have exerted some influence over her writing.

Besides, Brontë’s adoption of first-person perspective might have also been closely interrelated with the games she played with her siblings in the childhood. She recorded in an original manuscript when and how they established the plays of “Young Men” and “Islanders.” Their father bought a box of wooden toy soldiers for Branwell. The children name these toy soldiers, and started to make up stories for them. That is called the Young Men’s Play. At a later stage they commenced a kind of role-playing game. In December

\textsuperscript{20} Gaskell 94.
\textsuperscript{21} Tom Winnifrith, \textit{The Brontës and Their Background: Romance and Reality}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (London: Macmillan, 1988) 85.
\textsuperscript{23} Draft to Hartley Coleridge, December 1840: Letters, vol. 1, 236-37. See also Margaret Smith’s notes on pages 238-39.
1827, on one stormy winter night while the children were feeling dull owing to lack of amusement, Charlotte suggested they should pretend that each of them had an island of their own. When the choice was made, they proceeded to choose who should live on their islands. This is called the Islanders’ Play. We must note that the chief figures on their islands are all famous men of their time. There were noted surgeon, physician, doctor, member of parliament, and well-known men of letters. In their games, the children impersonated the soldiers and islanders. As the personae of these plays, it was only natural that they chose to act out the adventure and war scenes. Later on, when they started to write down those stories, they also employed the participant’s point of view as a matter of course.

According to Christine Alexander, it was Branwell who came up with the idea of launching a magazine for the Young Men. Since this magazine was modeled on Blackwood’s Magazine and under Branwell’s dominance, it was decided that all the contributors and editors should be male; hence the sisters as contributors to the magazine assumed male identities. The decision is justifiable because there were practically no female characters in the early stage of the games about war and colonization. Seven months later, when Brontë took over the editorship, she still followed Branwell’s lead to write in a man’s voice. Sometimes she wrote as editor, sometimes as one of the created figure: Captain Tree. Later on she also assumed the voices of various authors, poets and critics—still all male. We must note that such a practice was not only compatible with the original design of the magazine, but also conformed to her great interest in contemporary political and military affairs. Owing to their father’s influence, the Brontë kids were very much concerned with politics. Charlotte was especially in fervent worship of the war-hero, Duke Wellington. She was fascinated with his heroic deeds and great personality. To her, his character is “noble, dignified and vigorous in the extreme”; while his mind “approaches

as nearly to the perfection of greatness and wisdom as human fallibility will allow.”25 In contrast, whether in real life or the books and magazines that she read, there was scarcely a female character worthy of her admiration. Lacking a properly feminine role model, Brontë naturally inclines to identify with masculine heroes.

It is perhaps for the same reason that, while Brontë gradually exhibits her growing interest in depicting the love affairs and relationship between her juvenile hero and heroines, she still adopts her brother Branwell’s perspective unconsciously. She keeps on seeing her female characters from a man’s angle and assigning male narrators to tell the stories, although the male narrators sometimes do sound adequately sympathetic with the heroines. Brontë’s persistent employment of a male narrator in her juvenile writings could also be related to the greater freedom of speech and behavior reserved for men. Automatically, Brontë would identify in her saga with “the power and privilege of the male world which allowed her independence of expression.”26 Though being born a girl made her subordinate to her brother, she could endeavor to write as a man and dispensed with the restrictions imposed upon female authorship, and thereupon sought to compete with her brother on an equal footing in terms of literary creation. After her long-term practice with the male narrators, it is only natural and reasonable that in her first full-length novel (The Professor) Brontë should choose to follow the same narrative technique.

In the following sections I will select both Brontë’s first and last novels as samples for my study of her narrative technique. The main reason behind such a choice is the similarity of the background and primary plot of the two stories. Their essential difference lies in that the hero-narrator of The Professor is a male tutor while the heroine-narrator of Villette is his female counterpart. They both choose to leave their homeland and try their fortune in a foreign country. Having encountered all kinds of trials and difficulties, they finally succeed

25 Written on 30 September 1829, when Charlotte was thirteen. Quoted from Christine Alexander, An Edition of the Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, 90.
26 Christine Alexander, The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë 227.
and own their prosperous business in running schools. In fact, scholars have remarked that *The Professor* and *Villette* are both the adaptations of Brontë’s Brussels experiences. However, the reader may be amazed to find out how different the outcomes of the two stories could be when one is told by a man while the other by a woman.

**The Masculine Narrative of *The Professor***

Since the publication of *The Professor* in 1857, many reviewers and critics have engaged in the attack against the agreeability of its hero—William Crimsworth—and the reliability of his narrative. Most critics judge *The Professor* nothing short of a failure: the derogatory adjectives they use to describe it range from “tame,” “grey,” “featureless,” to “drab.” As for those who have shown a little more tolerance to the fledgling author’s first effort in a realist novel, the kindest words from them are at best that *The Professor* shows some promise to the author’s mature novels, or that it is “the first revelation of a genius.” However, the fact remains that the interest and importance granted it are still primarily gained from its relation to *Villette*. One of the major reasons leading to such a universal critical dissatisfaction is Brontë’s awkward characterization, especially that of the eponymous hero/protagonist/narrator. Most critics speak of William Crimsworth unsparingly: some downright dismiss him as an unlikable, uninteresting hero, as in 1899 Mary A. Ward wrote in her introduction to *The Professor* that Crimsworth’s role is “not particularly manly; and he does not appeal to our pity.”

Eighty years later, Helene Moglen expresses a similar opinion by calling Crimsworth “feminized” and “almost androgynous.” Moglen sees Crimsworth not only “unsatisfactory as a hero,” but also “disappointing as the narrator.” Worse still, as the center of the narrative, he is virtually “the most crucial problem” of the

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28 Mary A. Ward, in Gates 102.
novel. Many critics denounce Crimsworth as hypocritical, self-righteous, and untruthful in view of the omissions and contradictions of his narrative. However, there are also certain critics (such as Catherine Malone) who believe that Brontë actually did not intend her hero-narrator to be an entirely sympathetic character, claiming that one of Brontë’s letters to George Smith with reference to *The Professor* could be served as sound evidence. When George Smith, though declining to publish the novel, proposed to preserve the manuscript in his establishment, Brontë refused and commented that even she herself “could not tolerate the monotonity of [Crimsworth’s] demure Quaker countenance.” Moving a step further, Annette Tromly argues that Brontë deliberately made Crimsworth an unreliable narrator, in order to “[explore] the reasons and the ways that an autobiographer presents himself to the world.” In addition, since Brontë’s novels began to win the feminist critics’ attention at the end of the 1970s, Crimsworth has also become the victim to gendered discourse. His masculine speech, his tone of male superiority, and the dismissive terms with which he abuses women have been registered word for word and criticized unrelentingly. He is often accused of either sexism or complicity in patriarchal oppression of women.

The above negative criticism regarding Crimsworth may be triggered by the fact that he is not a thoroughly reliable narrator in view of his withholding information and concealing his true feelings. As a result, at times his masculine discourse is seriously grating and insufferable. However, while I agree with Scholes and Kellogg’s opinion that “the idea of creating an unreliable fictional eye-witness is the sophisticated product of an empirical and ironical age,” I would like to argue that Brontë had not the least intention of making her hero a liar, a bore, or a sexist. On the contrary, though not as glorious as her juvenile Byronic hero, Crimsworth can still be credited as an ideal hero of the real, common life; or,

30 Moglen 86.
32 Annette Tromly, “*The Professor*,” in Gates 105.
33 Scholes and Kellogg 264.
as Margaret Smith describes, “a character near to her own heart, through whom her own feelings would be expressed.”

The degree of the truthfulness and reliability of Crimsworth’s narration lies in another essential question: could a first-person narrative be truly reliable? The answer depends and often is negative. The viewpoint is normally one-sided, hindered by individual wisdom and experience, and interfered by personal likes and dislikes. Since a first-person narrative is necessarily prejudiced, the unreliability of Crimsworth’s personal accounts seems not so inexcusable. Crimsworth’s tone and rhetoric also incur a lot of critical accusations. Indeed, when he starts to talk about himself, readers can hardly miss the obvious self-applause and self-aggrandizement in his discourse. He measures himself against the other males in his life circle: his wealthy and powerful uncles; his brutal, mercenary elder brother; Hunsden; M. Pelet; and M. Vandenhuten. Generally speaking, all these men would be seen as more successful than he is in the secular world, whether in terms of wealth, power, or social status. But throughout Crimsworth’s discourse he never conceives himself as secondary to any of them. Instead, he constantly reveals to his readers his integrity, independence, intelligence, stoicism, and fixity. He wishes his readers to believe that such characteristics have made him much superior to the other persons. When he goes to see M. Vandenhuten in the hope that the latter might exercise some influence on his behalf, his accounts of this meeting clearly demonstrate such a state of mind. In the beginning he acknowledges that to the world M. Vandenhuten is “rich, respected and influential” while he is “poor, despised and powerless”; however, as individual human beings he is convinced that their positions are “reversed.” M. Vandenhuten is “slow, cool, of rather dense intelligence, though sound and accurate judgment”; whereas he is “far more nervous, active, quicker both to plan and to practise, to conceive and to realize” (The Professor 195-96). He is surely confident enough to make such final comments: “my mind having more fire and action than his, instinctively

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34 Margaret Smith, introduction, The Professor xvii.
assumed and kept the predominance” (The Professor 196). The above judgments do sound like displeasingly arrogant self-flattery, and especially so when the comparison is made against his well-wishing benefactor. However, I would like to argue that all these self-pride and self-aggrandizement, if viewed from another angle, should not be used to prove that Crimsworth is morally defective, but are rather the consequence of the author Brontë’s endeavor in mimicking what she believes to be a man’s autobiography.

First of all, Brontë’s male narrator employs the typical “man’s language,” which is “forceful, efficient, blunt, authoritative, serious, effective, sparing and masterful.”35 Such a voice would undoubtedly suit her Byronic hero Zamorna very well, but seems striking, abrupt, and incompatible if uttered by Crimsworth, the penniless and helpless young man who is only mediocre in build, appearance, and intelligence. The fact is that most of the men he compares himself with are not very worthy models. What is to feel good about exceeding his snobbish, relentless uncles and beastly brother? Any decent man is nobler than they are. His learning is unquestionably far above his pupils, but we are never sure about whether he is more erudite or intelligent than Hunsden or M. Pelet. However, it is important to bear in mind that Crimsworth is telling his own story, a man’s story; therefore it must sound like a genuine one. Annette Federico has made a forceful argument regarding this point:

The voice of William Crimsworth . . . is aggressively masculine throughout his narrative, locked into a socially sanctioned tone of superiority. There is no feminine apologizing, no womanly code of docility. His voice approximates the literary qualities assigned to men, which Showalter has identified as “power, breadth, distinctness, clarity, learning . . . shrewdness, knowledge of life, and humor,” along with “masculine faults,” such as “coarseness and passion.”36

36 Annette R. Federico, “The Other Case: Gender and Narration in Charlotte Brontë’s The Professor,” Papers
“Coarseness” and “passion” might be faulty and undesirable, but they are also deemed expressions of manliness. There is certainly quite an amount of coarseness and rudeness in Crimsworth’s narrative, for example he calls the old Mesdames Pelet and Reuter (who have never offended him) “two droll old creatures” (*The Professor* 66); and, as a teacher, his spiteful, contemptuous remarks against his pupils are certainly inappropriate. While on the other hand, Crimsworth has consciously toned down the display of passion when writing his memoir. After all, he has expressed his belief from the very beginning that there are not too many vivid colors in life; hence he decides to employ a calm, reserved tone to narrate his own story. His choice seems especially appropriate when self-control, rationality, and composure are highly encouraged as male virtues.

Crimsworth’s seizure of hypochondria is another important incident that often incurs critics’ attack against his truthfulness. Hypochondria is a common phenomenon in Brontë’s works, for example, it happens to Jane Eyre after she leaves Rochester; to Caroline Helstone when she suffers from unrequited love and realizes the possible outcome of a loveless life awaiting her; to Lucy Snowe after she tastes the ultimate solitude and tormenting loneliness during the long vacation. These circumstances are truly unbearable enough for the reader to anticipate the heroines’ subsequent seizures, but Crimsworth’s case is the only exception. Hypochondria attack him when he has just secured a position with a handsome pay and won Frances’s consent to marry him. Conditions are turning favourable for him just as he says himself: “my course was widening, my prospect brightening . . . my affections had found a rest . . . my desires . . . had just alighted on the very lap of Fruition.” Therefore his question “why did Hypochondria accost me now?” is exactly the reader’s question (*The Professor* 211). Critics have tried to solve this puzzle for Crimsworth, but the fact that he chooses to say “nothing to anybody of what I felt” during the seizure and after the recovery, neither to his fiancée nor to his readers, is a much more intriguing question.
Moglen observes that the recovery from hypochondria “marks a psychic rebirth: an entry into a new life” for all Brontë’s hero and heroines who have been victims of it. In Crimsworth’s case she sees him as “[emerging] from the darkness of hypochondria into a sunny and elevated ‘place’ in society.” He finally secures the “power of the patriarch,” transforming into a husband, a father, and a “maître.” But Moglen also remarks that the resolution Brontë provides for Crimsworth’s crisis is “unconvincing.” She regrets that Brontë’s art has failed to make her hero “human,” with the result that “the reader who is informed of his development is aware of external change rather than organic process.” It is true that Crimsworth does shrink from analyzing his own weaknesses and conceal the darker aspects of his nature, but these behaviors only highlight the characteristic of the common man’s autobiography. Not every man is able to fully recognize his own defects and narrowness, and few would willingly disclose the unpleasant personal facts to the public. When a man, prosperous and successful at present, looks back on the tough road that he has striven through, often he would choose to recount his strengths and virtues rather than his mistakes and weaknesses. This is the case with Crimsworth. In contrast to Crimsworth’s utter reticence about his hypochondria, in Villette Lucy Snowe has demonstrated an entirely different attitude in handling the hypochondria episode. As a woman, Lucy does not feel the need to hide her vulnerability or conceal her weakness—these are considered the natural qualities of women. Therefore Lucy gives us a minute description about the causes and effects of her seizure, what actions she takes, and especially her own sentiments in the lengthy, painful process. As can be imagined readers generally feel pity for her. But Crimsworth (as a self-made man) must look strong and manly, so he could not allow himself to appear feeble or pathetic in the least. Besides, Brontë’s intention concerning The Professor is clear: she wishes to tell a story about success. It is about how a penniless

37 Moglen 96.
38 Moglen 97.
young man, relying on his own endeavor, self-control, rationality, and perseverance, finally overcomes all obstacles and acquires both professional success and familial happiness in life. The objective is to encourage the others who are struggling under the same trials and ordeals. Since Brontë aims at creating a successful role model for the reader toiling along a similar path, her spontaneous reduction of the descriptions about her hero’s imperfection and insufficiency is therefore understandable.

In my opinion, the major and essential flaw of this novel lies in Brontë’s failure to create a real human being, a man of flesh and blood. Without further thoughts on problems of the credibility of characterization, Brontë wishfully appropriates the masterful attitude and dictatorial voice of her Byronic hero for her ordinary hero. In terms of look, fortune, and social status, Crimsworth is not placed on a par with Zamorna. But Brontë grants Crimsworth the equivalent amount of masculinity. This indicates that Brontë lacks the ability to picture, to hypothesize, and to represent realistically an ordinary man’s situations, the difficulties and frustrations he might encounter in the harsh reality; nor can she imagine the evolvement of his psychology. These seem too complicated a task for a young female writer who (as she admits herself) lacks “observation and experience” about the opposite sex. Therefore the path she prepares for her poor tutor to walk on is actually far too smooth, and the result is necessarily that, as Catherine Malone remarks, the male protagonist “cannot convincingly tell the type of story Brontë wanted to narrate: a history of suffering.”

As to the questions regarding Crimsworth’s sexism, certain paragraphs often attract the feminist critics’ attention. For instance, when Crimsworth terms Frances “my best object of sympathy on earth,” “my ideal of the shrine in which to seal my stores of love,” and “silent possessor of ... those sources of refreshment and comfort to the sanctuary of home” (The Professor 156), some critics point out that he is virtually turning his ideal woman into an

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39 Malone 180.
While in another paragraph Crimsworth recounts proudly how adept he is at manipulating Frances’s moods: “I could kindle bliss, infuse awe, stir deep delight, rouse sparkling spirit, and sometimes waken pleasurable dread” (The Professor 174), critics bluntly reply that such a dread can hardly be described as mutually pleasurable. They accuse Crimsworth of intending to play the role of God to Frances and behaving like a pasha to Zoraï de Reuter. Even when he stresses that he values a woman’s brain and mind more than her look, and that he would only marry a woman who can understand him and is capable of sharing his thoughts and emotions, critics (such as Malone) are no more pacified by his remarks. In their eyes, “he conceives of his wife in terms only of how she can tend to his needs—to his words, thoughts, and feelings.”

Admittedly Crimsworth is still the embodiment of egoism and selfishness, and that he displays a desire for mastery. Such male chauvinism is undoubtedly distasteful to modern readers (especially female readers), but when we look at this issue at its proper time—the early nineteenth century, then what Crimsworth demands of his wife is only the common practice of that society. At that time, a woman’s role in marriage is altruistic: the welfare of her husband and her family always comes before her own interest; and it is considered a matter of course that a man would only marry a woman who can provide gratifications for him. Under such a circumstance, as the majority of men would unhesitatingly choose to marry for beauty or fortune, Crimsworth’s insistence on looking for a soul mate does make him distinguished. Besides, in the Victorian Age the identity for married women is the so-called “coverture,” which means a wife is placed under her husband’s protection and she must obey his commands. Such a law also makes a man master to his wife; therefore Crimsworth’s desire for mastery can be described as the natural consequence of the period.

In fact, just as Margaret Smith observes, Brontë practically “distinguishes between

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40 Annette Tromly, in Gates 109.
41 Malone 183.
42 Malone 183.
tyranny and the kind of despotism assumed by William Crimsworth in his dealings with Frances.43 In a long paragraph Brontë has her hero expound his views on how woman’s docility and servility can lead to man’s tyranny. After he sees Zoraïde as she is, the more she fawns on him with a demeanor and look approximating “helot humility,” the more he despises her. He admits that her demeanor makes him feel “at once barbarous and sensual as a pasha,” but Brontë does not intend him to be a real pasha. She grants him the ability of self-reflection. Crimsworth is alert to the poisonous effect which can be wrought on his integrity: “the possession of a slave, self-given, went near to transform me into what I abhorred!” On the one hand he feels a certain gratification in being worshipped by an attractive young female; on the other hand he also feels “an irritating sense of degradation in the very experience of the pleasure” (The Professor 170-71). Crimsworth declares that he has always hated a tyrant, and he certainly has no intention to become one. As Brontë firmly believes, it is man’s tyranny rather than love that woman’s excessive, unnecessary humility would rouse. Her attitude can be proved by the fact that she also makes Frances and Jane Eyre elaborate on the same idea.

In fact, Crimsworth could be considered a fine model of a husband in Brontë’s standard. Though in the beginning he is somewhat reluctant about Frances’s keeping her job after getting married, later on he becomes very tolerant about her enthusiasm in and pursuit of a successful career. At a time when women are not encouraged to pursue their own professional achievements, Crimsworth is advanced enough to be able to appreciate his wife’s talent and even assist her to further develop it:

I put no obstacles in her way; raised no objection; I knew she was not one who could live quiescent and inactive or even comparatively inactive. Duties she must have to fulfil, and important duties; works to do, and exciting, absorbing, profitable work; strong faculties stirred

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43 Margaret Smith, introduction, The Professor xxiii.
in her frame and they demanded full nourishment, free exercise: mine was not the hand ever to starve or cramp them; no, I delighted in offering them sustenance and in clearing them wider space for action.

(The Professor 229)

Such an open-minded, supportive husband must have been very desirable in the eyes of talented women with great ambitions, including Brontë herself. Therefore one may argue that William Crimsworth is after all a character “near to Brontë’s heart.”

Another important phenomenon about The Professor is the emergence of the female voice. As Moglen correctly observes, in the writing of The Professor Brontë has already exhibited “her commitment to a female ‘voice.’”

44 In Jane Eyre, Shirley, and Villette, except a short account about the denouement, the main story lines end immediately after the proposal/marriage scenes. Yet The Professor does not end this way. There are still two long chapters following the proposal scene, in which Frances becomes the main speaker. Before these there is already a long first-person poem by Frances. When we look into these chapters closely, we cannot help feeling that such a practice violates the convention of man’s autobiography. As is previously discussed in chapter one, the focus of a man’s autobiography is always laid on his own ideas and opinions; whereas only a woman’s autobiography would report other people’s speeches and conversations in great quantity. However, in the latter part of The Professor, Crimsworth, the male narrator and autobiographer who is supposed to tell of his life in his own words, has saved a great space to record his wife’s utterance. In the section where Frances argues with Hunsden about politics and patriotism, we notice that the role Crimsworth plays is simply that of an observer: he does not join in the discussion, nor has he made any comment on these subjects. He is wholly preoccupied with noting down the two interlocutors’ words, demeanors, and facial expressions. In the following chapter Crimsworth asks Frances what she would do if she

44 Moglen 88.
were married to a brute or a tyrant, hence giving her a good chance to elaborate on how she believes a woman should fight against a tormenting marriage. On another occasion he inquires of Frances her opinions on the life of an old maid, and Frances naturally gives the reader another speech. It is noteworthy that in all the above instances Crimsworth always makes his wife the “spokesman” on behalf of them, as if he is in perfect agreement with her opinions, and even he himself could not make a better speech. In my opinion, these parts are precisely where the real author Brontë’s female identity reveals and works. Brontë’s practice has violated the traditional convention of masculine narrative and male autobiography, because a conventional male autobiographer of her age will hardly allow his wife a lengthy speech, even if concerning topics such as marriage or spinsterhood. When Crimsworth says that he determines to awaken Frances’s voice, it actually indicates that for Brontë the urge to assign her heroine a voice has grown stronger and stronger, therefore when contemplating the following novels she would naturally find it more appropriate to have her heroines—Jane Eyre, Caroline Helstone, Shirley Keeldar, and Lucy Snowe—elaborate further on the same topics which engross her deeply.

The Female Discourse of Villette

If we consider Crimsworth’s voice as typically that of a man, then Lucy Snowe’s voice represents exactly the reverse characteristic. In contrast to Crimsworth’s positive syntax, Lucy uses negative syntax, passive sentence, and inverted word order quite a lot. This kind of diction would at once make Lucy sound gentle, restrained, and inoffensive, hence marks out her femininity. But should this voice, with its seeming calmness, detachment, and reservation, be taken at its face value? Can Lucy’s submission and silence really be interpreted as, according to Gilbert and Gubar, the product of her realization that “she has bought survival at the price of never fully existing, escaped pain by retreating behind a dull,
grave camouflage.” Though Lucy adopts the feminine behavior and speech codes sanctioned by her society, and seems to help indoctrinate the “destructive strictures of patriarchy,” she is only using them as a mask to her genuine self. Those expressions of philosophical maxims about self-denial and female resignation work for her as a layer of protective coloring, enabling her to survive in the worst predicament. It is arguable that Lucy’s true nature is far from that of morbidness and frigidity; on the contrary, she is full of vivid fancies and energetic longings. It is the hard fact that forces self-repression into a habit of her. Gilbert and Gubar’s argument is challengeable because Lucy’s maturity is less “an aging process that brings women only a stifling sense of despair,” than a pilgrimage to her true self, a process of learning to dispose of her disguise and repression. Slowly but irreversibly, Lucy’s narrative reveals the development and transformation of her psychology in a complicated but exuberant dimension.

The beginning of *Villette* is intensely interesting if we attempt to read this novel as a kind of Bildungsroman. It is extremely different from other autobiographical fiction. If we compare the opening chapters of *Villette* to those of Jane Eyre or Dickens’s *David Copperfield*, then the difference is not only conspicuous but also denotes deep meanings. First of all, in *David Copperfield* and *Jane Eyre* there are both lengthy descriptions of the hero’s and heroine’s miserable childhood. David’s and Jane’s voices are similar while relating to their tormenting days; that is, it is the experiencing younger selves instead of the mature narrators who are telling those parts of stories. Nothing evokes the reader’s sympathy as easily as the image of a wretched, helpless child, and David and Jane have surely made good use of such an image. David spares no detail about his estrangement from his dear mother, the abuse from his wicked stepfather, and the humiliating factory experience. His tone is intimate and confidential: he tells his reader how his heart is pierced,

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46 Gilbert and Gubar 400.
47 Gilbert and Gubar 400.
how he cries, and how miserable he feels. In this way he appeals directly to the reader’s empathy and compassion, and we must say the strategy is employed with success. Little David readily wins from his reader heartfelt tears and emotional alliance. As for little Jane Eyre, though not as angelic a child as David—she is more defiant, unruly, and plain-looking—she adopts a similar narrative strategy. After reading the detailed accounts of her sufferings in her aunt’s household and in school, few readers will not be touched and feel pity for her.

On the other hand, the narrator of *Villette*—Lucy Snowe—has decided upon a different narrative strategy from the very beginning. She seems to have not the least intention of winning compassionate tears and feelings from her readers, and that is why she chooses to touch on lightly most of the significant happenings in her life. She wishes to keep her readers at a distance so that they may not be too much implicated in her personal tragedy to comprehend with cool brains the meanings she wants to convey. While childhood can be made the most sentimental part in an autobiography, Lucy is extraordinarily reticent about her childhood. In the first four chapters about little Lucy’s familial background and childhood life, she could have provided the reader with her personal data: her age, her look, her parents and relatives, where her home is . . . and so on. Yet Lucy’s exposition of her origin is vague. She never refers to her parents; she does not tell us what kind of persons they are, how she loses them, and how painful the loss is to her. As for her relatives, we only know that there are some who have taken care of her for some time. That is all. Details about those who are supposed to be dearest to Lucy are never provided, as if they are of no importance. Lucy begins the telling of her life story with a description of her position as a young dependent in her godmother’s household. Interestingly, Lucy chooses to ignore the convention of regular autobiography, and lays the narrative focus not on herself but on other members under the same roof, especially little Polly and young Graham Bretton, son of Lucy’s godmother. Such a gesture is meaningful. It points to the important fact that Lucy
has from early years assigned for herself a passive, secondary, and insignificant role to play. Though this seems like a voluntary choice, it is perceivable that Lucy practically has no alternative. In this group, Polly is the apple of her father’s eye, while Graham is his mother’s comfort; their parent-child connections are tight and intimate. Lucy is the only outsider among them. As an outsider who has no natural claim on others for love, little Lucy learns to play her role properly, and that is to be a docile child, a quiet observer and, as the grown-up Graham terms her, an “inoffensive shadow” (*Villette* 403).

The extent to which Lucy voluntarily mimics the feminine behavior dictated by society is shown in an instance. On the wet night while Lucy and Mrs. Bretton wait for little Polly’s arrival, Mrs. Bretton chooses to read the evening newspaper for a pastime, but Lucy chooses to sew. At first glance this episode does not seem to be of much importance. However, if we compare Lucy’s choice to Jane Eyre’s under a similar circumstance, the difference between the two characters becomes evident. As a despised dependent in a household full of hostility to her, Jane disregards her cousin’s often-threatened violence, and boldly takes his book to read without asking for permission in advance. As for Lucy, situated in a much more benignant environment, she would rather sew than touch Graham’s books in his absence. As we know that in early Victorian period, at night when the whole family gather together in the drawing room, a popular activity for man is to read to his own amusement or for the benefit of female family members; whereas for woman, sewing is almost the only choice. This is exactly what Hortense Moore, the supporter of gender roles, orders Caroline to do: “when the gentleman of a family reads, the ladies should always sew” (*Shirley* 90). While the generally docile Caroline has the courage to decline such a task, little Lucy takes up sewing unurged. It is not that needlework has any special attraction for her; years later she admits that “turning silk dresses, and making children’s frocks” have “neither charm for my taste, nor hold on my interest” (*Villette* 139-40). It is simply that little Lucy’s character is not as defiant as little Jane Eyre’s. She tries to carry out the duties
the society deemed appropriate for girls because, as a young, helpless dependent, she has to play by these rules in order to please her benefactors, and consequently obtains a somewhat peaceful life. But is Lucy a true believer in these rules and doctrines? I believe not. And I shall come back to the discussion about it in the later sections.

Polly can freely release tumultuous feelings when encountering her personal tragedies—separation from first her father then Graham—because she believes she is entitled to their love; whereas Lucy can only control her feelings for these people and repress her longings to be loved in return in order to avoid the pain of disappointment. Therefore, although Lucy is attracted to Graham as much as Polly is, she practically controls herself and answers Polly that she likes Graham only a little, because she is realistic enough to know “where is the use of caring for him so very much” (Villette 92). Polly sharply points out that the Brettons’ is not Lucy’s real home so that she eventually has to leave (at the same time reminds Lucy the cruel fact that she is merely an irrelevant outsider), and asks her if she feels no pain in the chest; instead of answering the question directly Lucy returns a hard blow: “you should not feel so much pain when you are very soon going to rejoin your father. Have you forgotten him?” (Villette 92). Lucy’s harsh retort successfully silences Polly and keeps her from further inquiry into this topic. But her response also highlights the facts that her tender spot has been touched and that she has to evade Polly’s question. As a little girl Lucy has learned that the best policy for her to cope with all the disappointments and ordeals in life is to hide the intensity of her feelings and her ability for vivid imagination under the mask of femininity. Polly suffers only temporary separation from her father whereas Lucy has lost her parents forever, but Polly can act out her tragic part to the full because she knows that somehow the pain will be relieved, and she mopes to the extent that Lucy describes as “no grown person could have performed that uncheering business better” (Villette 69). In Lucy’s remark we sense a taste of bitter irony. Throughout the whole story Lucy’s lot is much more unfavorable than Polly’s, but she makes no complaint. Indeed, just as she says:
“to whom could I complain?” (Villette 94). Hence this has become the characteristic of Lucy’s narrative—toning down the descriptions of her sufferings by exercising omissions or concealment.

Since Lucy depends on her godmother’s charity for living, supposedly the Bretton family should be her closest friends. But Lucy’s account demonstrates clearly her recognition of her true status in this family. Her godmother is not a caressing woman by nature; she will not be sentimental about her orphanlike goddaughter. As for Graham Bretton, Lucy has scarcely any exchange with him. Graham has more than once declared that the capricious but lovely Polly can provide him amusement that plain Lucy has failed to yield. Several years later the grown-up Graham (Dr. John) also acknowledges that “quiet Lucy Snowe tasted nothing of my grace” when they were under the same roof (Villette 403).

Polly shows no interest in winning Lucy’s friendship when they first meet. Then, though she gradually gets into the habit of “occasionally chatting” with Lucy, it is usually in a “trenchant manner,” which is “quite different from that she used with Mrs. Bretton, and different again from the one dedicated to Graham” (Villette 89). In fact, Polly only talks to Lucy when there is no one else to talk to, or when she needs Lucy’s help and comfort. Lucy has always known that her company to these people is not indispensable and her existence not particularly contributive to their happiness. This is the main reason for Lucy’s concealing her recognition of Dr. John as an old acquaintance. Lucy has recognized Dr. John to be Graham Bretton in chapter ten; but she withholds her discovery both from him and readers, and reveals the truth only in chapter sixteen.

Some critics would accuse Lucy’s behavior as conscious, gratuitous deception, lying, or neurosis, for example, Mary Jacobus condemns this as “the most disconcerting of her reticences, and the least functional.”48 Jacobus asserts that Lucy deliberately cultivates her invisibility in order to spy on other characters. Yet Nancy Rabinowitz tries to find some

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48 Mary Jacobus, Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism (London: Methuen, 1986) 44.
good reasons for Lucy’s silence; one of them lies in that Lucy realizes “silence gives her power.” 49 By withholding knowledge and not speaking, Rabinowitz explains, Lucy can turn a disadvantageous situation into advantageous to her: Dr. John’s ignorance of her is offset by her arbitrary choice of not sharing information with him. Her ability of discernment also makes her appear superior to Dr. John’s insensitivity in reader’s eyes. 50 Rabinowitz’s explanation is convincing that this is a “defensive strategy; Lucy cultivates invisibility as she cultivates reason, to protect herself from pain.” 51 Lucy is clear that Dr. John has not the least interest in her; he will never know her or like her for what she is. In chapter ten, before the idea “new, sudden, and startling” first enters her thought (Villette 163), Lucy has already described how Dr. John never pays any attention to her:

He laid himself open to my observation, according to my presence in the room just that degree of notice and consequence a person of my exterior habitually expects: that is to say, about what is given to unobtrusive articles of furniture, chairs of ordinary joiner’s work, and carpet of no striking pattern. (Villette 162)

Emphasizing Dr. John’s neglect of her as the deserved treatment for someone with a plain exterior, and further devaluing herself into a piece of furniture, Lucy is quietly pointing to the discriminating reception unattractive women usually receive. Though she seems to accept the fact and enounce no complaint, the reader will not miss the bitterness in her voice. She has made a further remark that Dr. John “never remembered that I had eyes in my head; much less a brain behind them” (Villette 163). Under such a circumstance, Lucy realizes that Dr. John will not befriend her just for who she is. For sure if she discloses to him her true identity, she can return to the Bretton circle and he will grant her the share of friendship

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50 Rabinowitz 247.
51 Rabinowitz 248.
proper for an old acquaintance (though not very intimate). But Lucy does not want this kind of forced relationship and friendship. As Rabinowitz correctly observes, “if Graham will not recognize her spontaneously or like her for herself, then she would just as soon not be known at all.”52 We will reckon how difficult such a decision must be for Lucy, absolutely friendless in Villette, not to claim the warmth of old friendship. People might wonder why Lucy does not actively seek to resume her relationship with the Brettons. Here is Lucy’s own explanation for her choice of obscuring her identity:

Well I knew that to him it could make little difference, were I to come forward and announce ‘This is Lucy Snowe!’ So I kept back in my teacher’s place . . . As to spontaneous recognition—though I, perhaps, was still less changed than he—the idea never approached his mind, and why should I suggest it? (Villette 248)

Lucy’s reasons are understandable, and at once highlight her lack of self-confidence and dread of appearing presumptive.

Lucy is often accused of coldness and heartlessness because she shows limited sympathy to the suffering little Polly. Lucy does criticize Polly severely for behaving like a busybody and a parasite: “the child had no mind or life of her own, but must necessarily live, move, and have her being in another” (Villette 83). This can be convincingly read as a direct challenge to the approved femininity. What Polly possesses and displays, we will remember, are the essential traits the society demands of women. She is “silent, diligent, absorbed, womanly” (Villette 73). When her father is there, she administers solely to his welfare (as an unmarried daughter should); when her father is taken from her, she nestles to another man (the embodiment of a husband), serves his needs, and seems to “feel by his feelings: to exist in his existence” (Villette 83). It is actually not Polly whom Lucy dislikes; Lucy disagrees with this kind of blind female self-denial and self-devotion that Polly stands

52 Rabinowitz 247.
for. In her utter loneliness, Lucy still insists on preserving her own self-identity. A lot of time Lucy does appear eccentric and gloomy to us. In fact, Brontë has anticipated such a critical response; or, to be more precise, Brontë deliberately makes her heroine this way in the hope that her reader will comprehend the reasons behind Lucy’s sullenness. In a letter to W. S. Williams discussing some plots of *Villette*, Brontë wrote: “You say that she may be thought morbid and weak . . . I consider that she *is* both morbid and weak at times; her character sets up no pretensions to unmixed strength, and anybody living her life would necessarily become morbid.”\(^{53}\) In chapter fifteen Lucy describes that in her extreme solitude during the long vacation, she has nearly lost the desire to live because the future seems to be as dark and hopeless as the present: “the dumb future spoke no comfort, offered no promise, gave no inducement to bear present evil in reliance on future good” (*Villette* 228). The above narrative is heretic enough, because a person firm in religious belief should always ignore the present woe but look forward to the future good. Lucy has foreseen the reproofs she would suffer from those readers whom she addresses mockingly as “religious reader,” “moralist,” “sage,” “stoic,” “cynic,” and “epicure”; but she has a forceful defense in reply: “perhaps, circumstanced like me, you would have been, like me, wrong” (*Villette* 228). Again, Dr. John’s prescription for Lucy’s neurosis is to cultivate happiness and a cheerful mind. To Lucy, such advice is at once hollow and meaningless. She muses: “Happiness is not a potato, to be planted in mould, and tilled with manure. Happiness is a glory shining far down upon us out of Heaven” (*Villette* 330). It is easy for Dr. John, a lucky person gifted with youth, good look and talent, member of the privileged sex, to ask Lucy such a question: why cannot she look and feel as buoyant and courageous as he does? Lucy points out the mistake the strong and the fortunate often commit: besides their inclination to ignore or underestimate the real difficulties of the weak and the unfortunate, they also order those

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who are suffering to ignore their own pains and sorrows.

From the beginning of her narrative Lucy has attempted to create an image of herself in the reader’s mind: a distant, cold person whose emotions are not easily disturbed. In her description of Polly she often expresses her objection to Polly’s excessive sentimentality. There is even a sense that Lucy secretly despises Polly for her affectional dependency and “monomaniac tendency” (Villette 69). However, though she professes: “I, Lucy Snowe, was calm” when witnessing Polly’s painful separation from her father (Villette 79), she is actually far from being composed and indifferent as she believes. On the scene of Polly’s reunion with her father, she has revealed her ability of sharing Polly’s sensations. Lucy describes: “it was a scene of feeling too brimful, and which, because the cup did not foam up high or furiously overflow, only oppressed one the more” (Villette 71). Lucy approves self-control and continence, and therefore finds all sorts of vehement, unrestrained outpourings of feelings distasteful; however, at this instance she is so oppressed by Polly’s compelled self-control that she even wishes Polly “would utter some hysterical cry, so that I might get relief and be at ease” (Villette 71). Just as J. F. Blackall observes, Lucy’s words show that “she is not tranquil at all inwardly, but volcanic. She is not detached at all, but wholly identifies herself with the situation in which Polly is involved.”

Lucy’s unconscious revelation of her sympathy with Polly throws some light on the concealed tenderness of her nature.

In fact, Lucy has a deep longing for human affection and intimate connection with others. The account of her relationship with her employer, Miss Marchmont, can be served as evidence. Lucy first speaks warmly of how they are like mother and daughter instead of mistress and dependent when they are together; then she explains the reasons for her strong attachment to her employer: Miss Marchmont has original character, steady virtues, powerful passions, and genuine feelings (Villette 97). Lucy would willingly give up her freedom and

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54 Jean Frantz Blackall, “Point of View in Villette,” JNT 6 (19976): 15.
stick to Miss Marchmont for as long as could be, just for the latter’s kindness and their mutual affection. But even the only person who truly cares for her in this world has to be snatched away from her. Thus, Lucy laments: “My little morsel of human affection, which I prized as if it were a solid pearl, must melt in my fingers and slip thence like a dissolving hailstone” (Villette 97). In these words we can perceive that Lucy is not devoid of the ability to love people. The exterior frigidity and indifference is merely the mask she puts on to conceal her vulnerability. Lucy learns from her experiences, and draws from them a lesson, that is: if she reminds herself constantly that she must not expect too much and love too dearly, then she will be able to preserve herself from fiercer pains and heart breakings. Lucy expresses her wish to reach a compromise with Fate: “to escape occasional great agonies by submitting to a whole life of privation and small pains” (Villette 97). She believes that the less she expects, the less likely she is to be disappointed.

As Lucy proceeds to deny the intensity or even the existence of her feelings, it only demonstrates her “recognition of the need to confront and control what she cannot realistically hope to gain or fulfill,” as Brenda R. Silver explains. That is why Lucy often resorts to the mechanism of containment to help curb her feeling when on the brink of explosion. Regarding Dr. John’s promise of remaining her true friend and writing letters to her, Lucy engages in a serious dialogue with her personalized Reason. Reason forbids her to harbor any presumptuous thought or unrealistic hope about Dr. John. Reason tells her that Dr. John may write once out of his kind nature, but “it cannot be continued—it may not be repeated. Great were that folly which should build on such a promise—insane that credulity which should mistake the transitory rain-pool . . . for the perennial spring yielding the supply of seasons” (Villette 307). Then Reason warns Lucy not to indulge in the pleasure of corresponding with Dr. John: “Brief be your answer. Hope no delight of heart—no indulgence of intellect: grant no expansion to feeling—give holiday to no single

faculty: dally with no friendly exchange: foster no genial intercommunication . . . ” (Villette 307). When Lucy protests: “But if I feel, may I never express?” the answer she receives is a resolute and decisive “Never” (Villette 307). Therefore Lucy moans that this Reason would not let her “look up, or smile, or hope”; she has no alternative but to “work for a piece of bread, to await the pains of death, and steadily through all life to despond” (Villette 307-8).

Quite different from what she expects, Dr. John seems intending to keep his words. He sends Lucy letters, visits her, and often takes her out. Hence for the first time Lucy can afford to form “a new creed,” a blessing which she never dares to dream of—“a belief in happiness” (Villette 335). But we soon learn that Lucy has to pay a dear price for cultivating such a belief. Her happiness and hopefulness could not last long because, without a single word of explanation, the Brettons suddenly cut off all forms of communication for seven whole weeks. They seem to have totally forgotten Lucy. For Lucy’s part, after a period of close intercourse with the Brettons, she would certainly find this sudden blankness incomprehensible and extremely unbearable. But she only suffers quietly and does not take the initiative to inquire about the reasons. Her nature would not permit her to demand an explanation from her friends because she does not think she has the right to. Just as she puts it: “So mortally did I fear the sin and weakness of presumption” (Villette 228).

Instead, she tries to defend her friends’ behavior: Dr. John and his mother live in a freer, busier world, have many affairs to attend to; therefore it is understandable that they might sometimes forget about their hermit-like friends, “who live in retirement, whose lives have fallen amid the seclusion of schools or of other walled-in and guarded dwellings” (Villette 348). Lucy would not speak a harsh word about their oblivion of her. She professes: “in my reason I well knew them blameless, and in my heart acknowledged them so” (Villette 349), yet she also honestly portrays to the reader the anxiety, disappointment, bitterness and despair she has experienced during those seven weeks. In truth the Brettons’ behavior is censurable. They could have at least sent Lucy a short note explaining the conditions
preventing their communication for a certain period of time, and Lucy would understand. In this incident the Brettons’ oblivion demonstrates their disregard for Lucy and her feelings, and proves that their friendship is only a mirage for Lucy to depend her happiness on. Naturally, Lucy regresses to her accustomed fatalistic outlook. She tries to persuade that these are all what Fate reserves for her. She tells herself: “these blanks were inevitable: the result of circumstances, the fiat of fate, a part of my life’s lot, and . . . a matter about whose origin no question must ever be asked, for whose painful sequence no murmur ever uttered” (Villette 349). In a way, this incident has justified Lucy’s determination to repress her feelings and adopt a passive attitude. She has no alternative. By these Lucy could at least preserve her internal peace and avoid greater pains.

Some critics find Lucy not very appealing because most of the time her narrative seems unreliable or deceitful. For example, Helene Moglen calls Lucy a ‘tortured, oddly unsympathetic woman’ and describes Lucy’s voice as characterized by “indirection” and “neurotic rationalization.”\(^{56}\) Mary Jacobus’s criticism is more scathing: “Lucy lies to us. Her deliberate ruses, omissions and falsifications break the unwritten contract of first-person narrative (the confidence between reader and ‘I’) and unsettle our faith in the reliability of the text.”\(^{57}\) But it can be argued that Lucy is not so dishonest or unreliable as the above critics have assumed. Truly, a prominent characteristic of Lucy’s narrative is the self-contradiction in her self-analysis. She has a tendency to profess to be one thing but shortly reveal herself to be another. However, this does not suggest intentional deception, but the struggle between Lucy’s “socialized self” and “true self.” As Brenda Silver puts it, Lucy “struggles to compromise between her necessarily unconventional actions and her need to remain within the social structure.”\(^{58}\) Lucy has more often than not presented honestly her inner controversy. Her discourse about “imagination” is a good example. In the

\(^{56}\) Moglen 196.

\(^{57}\) Jacobus 42.

\(^{58}\) Silver, in Gates 290.
opening paragraph of chapter two, Lucy has made a forceful announcement: “I, Lucy Snowe, plead guiltless of that curse, an overheated and discursive imagination” (Villette 69). The words “plead guiltless” suggest that, to Lucy, imagination is a guilty and harmful quality therefore highly undesirable. But ironically, immediately after the affirmation Lucy contradicts herself by saying that the room seems to be “haunted” by Polly’s grief. Lucy’s imagination and fancy often emerge on unusual occasions. She makes a bold decision to go to Villette and find a job at Madame Beck’s pensionnat, not knowing whether there is still a vacancy and not having any recommendation letter. Lucy describes that she departs on “the shadow of a project” and is oppressed by “ceaseless consciousness of anxiety” (Villette 122). Worse still, the external circumstance seems disheartening: the sky is “monotonously gray” and the atmosphere is “stagnant and humid” (Villette 122). In this situation we would naturally picture Lucy to be dejected and worried. But Lucy’s description of her psychology takes us by surprise. She says: “amidst all these deadening influences, my fancy budded fresh and my heart basked in sunshine” (Villette 122). It cannot be helped but thinking that Lucy’s fancy must have been extremely powerful to be able to bring sunshine to her heart in such adverse circumstance.

Toward the end of this novel, Lucy’s imagination ultimately breaks the powerful bondage constituted of her reason and moral discipline, and takes complete hold of her. Lucy writes: “Imagination was roused from her rest, and she came forth impetuous and venturous” (Villette 547). Imagination orders Lucy to rise herself, to take action, to go out; hence leading to the subsequent climax—a series of Lucy’s incidental discoveries and misconceptions. When Lucy witnesses M. Paul in company with his beautiful young ward (Justine Marie), she hastily assumes that they have a plan to get married and bitterly imagines that there will be a love scene. She frankly admits that her fancy is so energetic and active that “[had] there been nothing of love in the demonstration, my Fancy in this hour was so generous, so creative, she could have modeled for it the most salient lineaments, and given it
the deepest life and highest colour of passion” (Villette 566). What comes after Lucy's acknowledgement of her capability for vivid imagination is the recognition of her strong emotions: her love for M. Paul and the ensuing jealousy concerning him and Justine Marie. On seeing the two together, Lucy admits to the encroachment of jealousy she has never felt before (Villette 567). Even after she and M. Paul have confirmed their mutual affection, she still could not repress her hostility to the imaginary rival in love. She expresses her own astonishment at the intensity of her feelings: “Warm, jealous, and haughty, I know not till now that my nature had such a mood” (Villette 591).

In this fictive autobiography, Lucy has clearly presented the process of her gradual progress towards the understanding and revelation of her true nature. In this process M. Paul has played a most influential part. It is notable that from the beginning M. Paul is the only person who has detected Lucy's well-concealed innate qualities. It is an interesting phenomenon that he is also the only one in front of whom Lucy can afford to behave freely and speak candidly. M. Paul can be properly compared to the embodiment of patriarchal power in this pensionnat circle. He is the moody, arbitrary, commanding master; nearly all the women in the establishment—ranging from the directress, teachers, to the girl students—show him their due respect, fawn on him, or fear him. Lucy is the only exception. She laughs at him secretly, confronts his masculine authority publicly, and frequently exasperates him with her retorts and deeds. Lucy is the only woman who is not subservient to male dominance. There is more evidence to this. When Madame Beck appears as the surrogate for man's power and challenges Lucy's courage to give an English lesson, her sneering attitude has stimulated Lucy's strength and determination to act not according to her accustomed cowardice but to contest. Lucy claims herself “not soothed, nor won, nor overwhelmed” by Madame’s “man’s aspect” (Villette 141); on the contrary, she tells Madame squarely: “I am no more excited than this stone . . . or than you” (Villette 141). Lucy could become competently defiant and equally forceful when confronting such masculine
oppression.

When at the end of the story Lucy finally becomes willingly submissive to M. Paul, it is clearly expressed that she is not yielding to his masculine identity and the embodied patriarchal system but to the precious true love he has offered her. Sitting beside M. Paul, Lucy declares that she is “once more herself”: she is “re-assured—not desperate, nor yet desolate; not friendless, not hopeless, not sick of life, and seeking death” (*Villette* 582). Her statement is extremely noteworthy because these qualities she presently denies have actually been what she previously feels all the time. Such a divine, priceless love has changed Lucy completely. It helps Lucy to know herself better, gives her courage to face squarely her passions, and ultimately contributes to Lucy’s self-assurance and self-identification. This also testifies to Brontë’s conviction—the incomparable significance of true love in women’s life. In the next chapter I shall explore further into this important subject of Brontë’s writing.
Chapter 3

Love and Marriage

Charlotte Brontë has announced in her preface to *The Professor* that “her hero” should have the following qualifications:

My hero should work his way through life as I have 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 . . . that he should not even marry a beautiful nor a rich wife, nor a lady of rank—As Adam’s son he should share Adam’s doom—Labour throughout life and a mixed and moderate cup of enjoyment. (*The Professor* 1, italics mine)

In the Victorian aura of “self-help,” to create one’s own fortune was considered a noble achievement, and that is why Brontë would disapprove of her heroes taking a short cut to prosperity through marrying a lady of fortune or fine social status. Her reproach to marital *nouveau riche* is well understood. But what is the reason for Brontë’s objection to a man’s marrying a good-looking wife, when a great number of the beautiful girls were too poor to bring a bountiful dowry to their husbands? There are some clues in her novels, where in most of the cases beauty seems to stand always on the opposite end to virtues and intelligence, with only a few rare exceptions in her latter novels, such as Shirley Keelder and Caroline Helstone in *Shirley* and Paulina Mary in *Villette*. It is a common practice that the heroines with whom Brontë most identifies herself, including Frances Henri in *The Professor*, Jane Eyre, and Lucy Snowe in *Villette*, are all plain-looking governesses or teachers who start out in the world not with fortune or family connections, but with intellectual power and
morality. In contrast, their rivals in love normally have the advantages of beauty, charm, money, or rank, but pitifully inferior to them either in brain or in mental capacities. They are usually given derogatory epithets such as “dolls,” “fools,” or “coquettes.”

Feminine Beauty in Antithesis to Female Intelligence

In *The Professor*, the hero William Crimsworth has given some detailed accounts of feminine beauty and personalities of the females around him. Observations are made by Crimsworth who experiences disillusionment of ideals: from a young man full of unrealistic imagination about the other sex owing to his limited experience with women, to a mature adult who has finally some understanding of female personality. He describes his sister-in-law as being agreeable and lively, full of girlish charm; but when he searches for intelligence in her face or conversations, he “watches in vain for a glimpse of soul,” and all he finds is “vivacity, vanity—coquetry” (*The Professor* 10). He then concludes that her features and expressions would be a charm to most men, but they are not to him. Before Crimsworth has the chance to give lessons in a seminary for young ladies, he is full of romantic longings: “I shall now at last see the mysterious garden, I shall gaze both on the angels and their Eden” (*The Professor* 68). However, once he enters that garden, he finds that the most beautiful girls there are also the ones who are the farthest removed from the image of angels. At first, Crimsworth is dazzled by their appearances; but he shortly claims that “in less than five minutes” these girls’ giddy whispers and titters would reveal their poor characters that may otherwise have been overlooked. He is compelled to caustically debase their appeal to appearances: the girl who resembles a “Low-Country Madonna” can only be distinguished from a lifeless wax doll by the fact that “her noble bust heaved with her regular

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1 See, for example, in chapter 10-12 of *The Professor*, Crimsworth’s depreciatory descriptions of the female students and teachers in Mdille. Reuter’s establishment. Also in chapter 7 of *Shirley*, Mr. Helstone sees women “as silly, as light-headed, as vain, as open to ridicule.” He prefers to treat a woman “as a doll, a child, a plaything.”
breathing, her eyes moved a little”; another girl has a face “striking, more alive and brilliant,”
but her features betokens neither consistency nor good sense; the other, as Crimsworth admits,
has the qualities “whose union many persons regard as the perfection of beauty,” but he
proceeds to add that “she was sensual now, and in ten years’ time she would be coarse,” and
worse still, she is precociously coquettish (*The Professor* 76-77). Such beautiful looks can
create no effect of winning any favourable opinion from Crimsworth; on the contrary, in
order to resist the sensual temptation, he has to regard them as his rivals, and “[buckles] on a
breast-plate of steely indifference and let down a visor of impassible austerity” (*The
Professor* 77). We shall find such harsh criticisms on physical beauties recurrent in
Brontë’s novels, and Crimsworth is certainly not the only character that despises the sensual
beauty and prefers to cherish woman’s intelligence and mind more.

In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë has presented two different types of beauties. Jane’s cousin
Georgiana Reed represents the first type. Georgiana is a spoiled doll and a butterfly in
society, who has no concern for anyone or anything except for her own looks, comfort and
welfare. Her greatest desire is to lead an idle, dissipated, and dependent life in which she is
pampered and admired by all. Other female characters in Brontë’s novels that belong to this
category include the misses Sykes in *Shirley* and Ginevra Fanshawe in *Villette*. As for the
other type, Jane’s rival in love Blanche is the representative figure. She is moulded as a
goddess, possessing majestic beauty and many accomplishments. But her utterance,
demeanor and facial expressions soon disclose what kind of person she really is: she is full of
haughtiness and excessively conscious of her advantages, but has no warmth or
compassion for people who are not as lucky as she is in terms of looks, talents, or social
status. In a scene of drawing room, Jane has a good opportunity to observe Blanche closely,
and to offer readers a step-by-step, comprehensive analysis of the gazed object. Blanche’s
cold-heartedness is vividly exposed in the way she expresses her prejudicial opinions of her
governesses and in the descriptions of how she bullies and stamps on those poor dependants’
dignity. According to what she has observed, Jane confidently pronounces that Blanche cannot excite the feeling of jealousy in her heart, because Blanche is “too inferior to excite the feeling;” she illustrates that Blanche was very showy, but she was not genius: She had a fine person, many brilliant attainments; but her mind was poor, her heart barren by nature . . . She was not good; she was not original: she used to repeat sounding phrases from books: she never offered, nor had, an opinion of her own. She advocates a high tone of sentiment; but she did not know the sensations of sympathy and pity; tenderness and truth were not in her. (Jane Eyre 163)

What external assets Blanche possesses Jane might lack, but all the more precious qualities that a woman has reason to boast of (as those portrayed in the above citations), are attributed to Jane instead of Blanche. Through Jane’s mouth Brontë seems to be giving advice to her female readers on the best policy for a woman to adopt in courtship: there is no need to strive to fascinate a man with “meretricious arts” and “calculated manoeuvres”—such as flashing her glances, displaying her graces, and manufacturing elaborate airs. In contrast, a genuinely good woman will emit the fragrance of innocence, kindness, and good sense; then the sensible man will be naturally drawn to her beautiful mind. A skillful coquette might blind a wise man’s eyes for a short while, but after the honeymoon her charms will be gone and the marriage between two unequals will turn out to be an abyss of lifelong torture and misery. Brontë believes that only a union between two people of compatible mental power and intellectual strength can guarantee real happiness, and all her heroes and heroines have more or less expressed such an opinion. For example, Jane firmly believes that Blanche will not be able to please Rochester if they get married; on the other hand, Crimsworth repeatedly explains to himself that marrying a pretty doll or a fair fool would be the most foolish mistake a man could make:

when passion cooled, how dreadful to find a lump of wax and wood laid in
my bosom, a half idiot clasped in my arms, and to remember that I had
made of this my equal . . . to know that I must pass the rest of my dreary life
with a creature incapable of understanding what I said, or appreciating what
I thought or of sympathising with what I felt! (The Professor 98)

The same attitude is also preserved in her writing of Shirley and Villette.

As is shown in the above instances, in the earlier stage of Charlotte Brontë’s writing
career, each woman is portrayed as endowed with only one kind of the blessings: either
beauty or intelligence, but hardly both. Such a clear-cut differentiation is too conspicuous
to be ignored. There are two possible explanations for the representations of feminine
beauty in complete antithesis to female morality and intelligence in Brontë’s novels. In the
first place, people are generally inclined to consider the exterior beauty as indication to the
internal goodness, and they are easily deceived by appearance, resulting in admiring the
seemingly good but neglecting the truly valuable. The discrepancy between appearance and
real nature is a topic Brontë has much interest in and explores a lot in her novels. She is
well aware of how much appearance could deceive: what looks beautiful outside might be
virtually corrupted inside, whereas unattractive things could be of the greatest value. In
order to caution people against their obsession with appearance, a clear line must be drawn
between ostensible goodness and genuine goodness. Brontë thus resolves to simplify the
situations in real life and divides women into two opponent groups. In addition to this
methodological concern, another explanation involves the authoress’s psychological level,
that is, Brontë’s deeply rooted sense of her own personal appearance. According to Mrs.
Gaskell’s description, Brontë was very small in figure; her features were “plain, large, and ill
set,” and she had a crooked mouth and a large nose, although Mrs. Gaskell kindly added that
her eyes and power of the countenance over-balanced every physical defect. As can be
detected, the first impression Brontë created in her new friends was hardly favourable. Her
closest friend Ellen Nussey once remarked that Brontë never seemed to be the unattractive
little person others appointed her, but she also admitted that Brontë was certainly “anything but pretty” when they first met. Another school friend Mary Taylor, in a letter to Mrs. Gaskell, reported that she had told Brontë straightforwardly that she was very ugly. We can imagine the shock and hurt such remarks caused in Brontë’s heart. Several years later, when Mary apologized to Brontë for making such an impertinent comment, Brontë answered that Mary had done her a great deal of good. The truth is, Mary’s criticism contributed to Brontë’s recognition of the fact that she was unlike the fair ladies of her reading and juvenile creation. As we know, Brontë had a special interest in drawing sketches of her imaginary juvenile characters. Under her paintbrush, the central hero Zamorna was amazingly handsome while the ladies surrounding him are all unexceptionably good-looking. Brontë was especially meticulous in representing the female characters. With great interest she portrayed in fine brushwork their lovely faces, hairstyles, costumes, jewels and accessories, neglecting not even the tiniest details. It is the same with her written work, where Brontë displays prodigious talent in the verbal illustration of her juvenile heroes and heroines. Zamorna’s Byronic traits and irresistible charms are vividly conveyed in the following descriptions:

He seemed to be in the full bloom of youth: his figure was toweringly, overbearingly lofty, moulded in statue-like perfection, and invested with something which I cannot describe—something superb, impetuous, resistless . . . His hair was intensely black, curled luxuriantly, but the forehead underneath . . . looked white and smooth as ivory. His eyebrows were black and broad, but his long eyelashes and large clear eyes were deep sepia brown . . . When he smiled, lips and teeth appeared such as any lady might have envied, coral-red and pearl-white. The upper lip was very short, Grecian, and had a haughty curl which I knew

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well.\textsuperscript{3}

As for the juvenile heroines, each of them has her individual style of beauty and attraction. Zenobia is a haughty beauty, “the most learned woman of her age,” and “the modern Cleopatra,”\textsuperscript{4} the authoress remarks thus. Another heroine of an earlier story, Marian Hume, is a tender and beautiful young bride. Brontë’s portrayal of her reflects both Byron’s heroine Haidee and William Finden’s engraving of Lady Jersey in his “Illustrations to the Life and Works of Lord Byron,” published in 1833:

> Her cheeks were tinted with a rich, soft crimson, her features moulded in the utmost perfection of loveliness; while the clear light of her brilliant hazel eyes, and the soft waving of her auburn ringlets, gave additional charms to what seemed already infinitely too beautiful for this earth.\textsuperscript{5}

The fact is, Brontë has always been a devotee of aestheticism. There is much evidence to prove this. As Gérin states, “a token of her ardent pursuit of Ideal Beauty is to be found in the fragment in which she set down at 13 the ‘List of the Painters whose Works I wish to see’”; and her friend Mary Taylor has also reported how much Brontë was engrossed in fine art at about the same period: “whenever an opportunity offered of examining a picture or cut of any kind she went over it piecemeal, with her eyes close to the paper, looking so long . . . She could always see plenty and explained it very well.”\textsuperscript{6} Thus, it will not be too far from the truth to infer that Brontë was deeply attracted to the world of beauty early in her life.

We can also add some weight to the above argument by examining her reading list—the early literary influence on her. Brontë’s childhood and adolescence spanned the 1820s and 1830s; at that time it was the peak of Romanticism in art, literature and music. Brontë’s mind was also deeply immersed in this movement. Byron’s influence on her was

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generally acknowledged; she also loved to read the romances written by Sir Walter Scott. In romantic poetry and fiction, the physical beauty of female was always the extolled subject, and the passion of love was a constant theme. Reading Brontë’s early writing and later mature novels, readers sense that there is ardent passion in her heart and romantic imagination in her head; therefore, it will not be too much to say that Brontë yearned to be living in her imaginary kingdom, that “burning clime.” Sensitive as she was, what she saw of her own reflection in the mirror and the comments from her friends were evidence clear enough to assure her that she was not what she wished to be. She must have cared a lot about the defects of her appearance, and perhaps never forgot or ceased to care throughout the life. We can find some clues in support of this argument from her letters as well as her novels. In *Jane Eyre*, early in her childhood Jane is already painfully aware that her plainness makes her less agreeable and pitiable to people in her aunt’s household. One maid has made a ruthless but clever observation that “if [Jane] were a nice, pretty child, one might compassionate her forlornness; but one really cannot care for such a little toad as that” (*Jane Eyre* 21). In Jane’s adulthood, she admonishes herself repeatedly against the foolish dream of being loved by Rochester because she is merely a “disconnected, poor, and plain” governess. As in real life Brontë has drawn the caricatures of Ellen Nussey and herself that mocked her own image, Jane does something to the same effect. She draws a picture of herself in chalk “without softening one defect: omit no harsh line, smooth away no displeasing irregularity,” and then she draws an imaginary portrait of a loveliest face and attributes it to Blanche Ingram. When comparing these two pictures, she admits that the contrast is “as great as self-control could desire” (*Jane Eyre* 141). This could also be the outcome when Brontë compared her own self-portrait to the imaginary portraits of her lovely juvenile heroines. In Brontë’s mature novels the plain heroines are constantly in painful consciousness of their outward deficiencies. They take it for granted that there is absolutely no chance that a good-looking young man will ever fall in love with unattractive women like
themselves. When Jane first encounters Rochester, he is hurt in a horse accident and she volunteers to be of service. It is rather a bold gesture for a young woman like Jane to actively offer her help to a stranger of the opposite sex. Jane later admits, that had Rochester been young and good-looking, she would not have dared to make the offer. She remarks:

Had he been a handsome, heroic-looking young gentleman, I should not have dared to stand thus questioning him . . . I had a theoretical reverence and homage for beauty, elegance, gallantry, fascination; but had I met those qualities incarnate in masculine shape, I should have known instinctively that they neither had nor could have sympathy with anything in me, and should have shunned them . . . (Jane Eyre 99)

Another plain heroine, Lucy Snowe, has also expressed the same quality of diffidence. With an anguished heart she recognizes that she has to give up the feeling for Dr. John, because “[the] love, born of beauty was not mine . . . I could not dare to meddle with it” (Villette 567). Even at the moment that Lucy and M. Paul are confessing their mutual affections, she is still extremely sensitive to her lover’s opinion regarding her appearance. When M. Paul sighs that she has become wholly pale and her worn-out look makes him feel ill, Lucy’s response is impulsive:

“Ah! I am not pleasant to look at—?”

I could not help saying this; the words came unbidden: I never remember the time when I had not a haunting dread of what might be the degree of my outward deficiency . . . . (Villette 583)

Though it is perspicacious enough of Lucy to discern that their love does not belong to the kind which is “born of beauty” but rather “another love” more of intellectual order, Lucy has to confess to her share in the weakness of laying “so much stress on an opinion about appearance.” She still has “a great fear of displeasing—a strong wish moderately to please
M. Paul” (Villette 583).

On this issue Brontë has displayed an attitude similar to that of her fictional heroines. In her correspondences with friends, Brontë has more than once shown her sentiment about her physical appearance. In a long letter to Mary Taylor, Brontë has given detailed accounts of her and Anne’s first visit to her publishers in London in 1848. When George Smith brought his two sisters to call on them with intention of taking them to the opera, such were Brontë’s impressions of the looks and bearings of the Smith brother and sisters: “They (sic) came in two elegant, young ladies in full dress—prepared for the Opera—Smith himself in evening costume white gloves & c. a distinguished, handsome fellow enough.” On the other hand she was aware of the vivid contrast between themselves and the Smiths—in terms of both attires and appearances:

we attired ourselves in the plain—high-made, country garments we possessed . . . They must have thought us queer, quizzical looking beings—especially me with my spectacles—I smiled inwardly at the contrast which must have been apparent between me and Mr. Smith as I walked with him up the crimson carpeted staircase of the Opera House and stood amongst a brilliant throng at the box-door which was not yet open. 7

There have been plenty of speculations, in their contemporary period as well as in modern time, about whether there was something more than pure friendship between Brontë and George Smith. Up to now there is no strong evidence to justify such speculations, but Brontë has indeed expressed her belief that there was a great gap separating herself and Smith therefore it was impossible for him to become a suitor. Her own look, she believed, was one of the elements contributing to the formulation of this gap: “my six or eight years of

seniority, to say nothing of lack of all pretensions to beauty & c. are a perfect safeguard—I should not in the least fear to go with him to China.\textsuperscript{8} It cannot be helped thinking that, had Brontë not cared a lot about the fact of her lacking physical charm and beauty, she would not have stressed it so much. Unfortunately, her insight into their relationship was proved accurate. In a letter to Mrs. Humphry Ward, dated 18 August 1898, George Smith confessed his true feelings for Brontë: “I never was in the least bit in love with Charlotte Brontë . . . the truth is, I never could have loved any woman who had not some charm or grace of person, and Charlotte Brontë had none . . . .”\textsuperscript{9} In 1900, in recollection of Brontë, Smith wrote in \textit{Cornhill Magazine} about his understanding of Brontë’ s sentiment regarding this issue:

There was but little feminine charm about her; and of this fact she was herself uneasily and perpetually conscious . . . I believe she would have given all her genius and all her fame to have been beautiful. Perhaps few women ever existed more anxious to be pretty than she, or more angrily conscious of the circumstance that she was not pretty.\textsuperscript{10}

However, if Brontë was so engrossed in the beauty in literature and plastic art, how did she bear the truth that she was not one of the citizens in the kingdom of beauty? While Brontë pondered and reasoned about this problem, there might have been the working of a kind of psychological self-defense mechanism. It helped Brontë to reach the following conclusions: those qualities she did not possess might virtually be of little value, and the most important asset that a woman should cherish was not beauty but morality and intelligence. This explains partly the phenomenon that the theme of beautiful woman versus sensible woman prevails in Brontë’ s novels; because whenever she deals with this subject, it helps to consolidate her beliefs and convictions once again.

\textsuperscript{9} Quoted from Gérin 436.
\textsuperscript{10} Quoted from Gérin 364-65.
Realistic enough to bear in mind that she lacks the power to charm, and the financial difficulty of her father’s household, in her early adulthood Brontë practically warns herself against the prospect of getting married. In a letter to Ellen, she writes:

> it is an imbecility which I reject with contempt—for women [who] have neither fortune nor beauty—to make marriage the principal object of their wishes & hopes & the aim of all their actions—not to be able to convince themselves that they are unattractive—and that they had better be quiet & think of other things than wedlock—\(^{11}\)

For a long time Brontë held a firm belief that she would become an old maid. But in fact Brontë was not short of suitors or the chances to get married, therefore there must have been other reasons equally important that resolve in her prediction of never getting married.

**Brontë’s Ambivalence towards “Passion”**

In March 1839 Ellen’s brother Henry Nussey asked Brontë to marry him. Though she had always regarded him as amiable, well-disposed and respectable, she nevertheless rejected his proposal. Brontë modestly explained to Henry that she believed her disposition and character were not calculated to form the happiness of a man like him, so she declared: “I will never for the sake of attaining the distinction of matrimony and escaping the stigma of an old maid take a worthy man whom I am conscious I cannot render happy.”\(^{12}\) To Henry, she stressed only her own weaknesses which she believed would not guarantee the happiness of such a union, but she could be honest with Ellen about the more important reasons—her own prerequisites for a successful marriage. She wrote in the letter to Ellen in explanation of her rejection:

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\(^{11}\) Letter to Ellen Nussey, Apr. 1843: *Letters*, vol. 1, 315.

I felt that though I esteemed Henry—though I had a kindly leaning towards him . . . Yet I had not, and never could have that *intense attachment which would make me willing to die for him—and if ever I marry it must be in that light of adoration that I will regard my Husband.*

Brontë knew that rather than a “serious, grave, cool-headed” woman others generally appointed her by her exterior, she was actually more a “wild, romantic enthusiast.” She could not put on a mask of gravity all day long in front of her husband, just as Jane Eyre could not force herself to do that with St. John; she wanted to laugh and say whatever whim that came into her head, as Jane would when she is by Rochester’s side; but most importantly, she needed to preserve the freedom to dream and to fantasize. How could she possibly settle for a man as quiet and unexceptionable as Henry? At this stage the fervent passion, intense attachment, and ultimate adoration were still the indispensable requirements for a desirable matrimony. If she could not find such a man as could trigger those emotions in her, she would rather remain celibate all her life than marry someone not up to her standard. It did not matter to her at all if Henry should be the only suitor. In fact, Brontë’s enchantment in passion and romantic love has been minutely revealed in her characterizations of two juvenile heroines of this period: Mina Laury (1836-8) and Caroline Vernon (1839). Mina Laury is the oldest and the most faithful of Zamorna’s mistresses. Though Mina Laury is “‘strong-minded beyond her sex,’ yet in the presence of Zamorna she is ‘as weak as a child—she lost her identity.’” Her admirer describes her thus: “she had but one idea—Zamorna, Zamorna—! it had grown up with her—become part of her nature—Absence—Coldness—total neglect—for long periods together—went for nothing—she could no more feel alienation from him than she could from herself.”

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17 Alexander 166.
relationship with Zamorna, Mina Laury is willingly dedicated and subservient to “her master,” hence sometimes she almost seems like a masochist to us. Caroline Vernon is another heroine entangled in a resistless infatuation for Zamorna. She first meets Zamorna at the age of eleven and is portrayed as having “a foreign wildness, a resemblance which stirred sensations in Zamorna.”\(^{18}\) Though she is the enemy’s illegitimate daughter, Zamorna still undertakes to be her guardian and tutor; but he “executed his office in a manner peculiar to himself—Guarded her with a vengeance & tutored her till she could construe the Art of Love at any rate.”\(^{19}\) Caroline eventually abandons herself to Zamorna’s lustful seduction. Just as Christine Alexander has observed, “romantic love continues to form the basic subject of Charlotte’s later juvenile manuscripts (1836-39).”\(^{20}\)

Although Brontë predicted that “ten to one” she should never have the chance of being proposed to again,\(^{21}\) about five months later in the same year there was another proposal of marriage from a curate named David Pryce. Once again she turned her suitor down. She related this incident to Ellen lightheartedly and thus concluded her letter: “I’m certainly doomed to be an old maid . . . never mind I made up my mind to that fate ever since I was twelve years old.”\(^{22}\) As we know, Brontë has ingrained prejudice against curates; of this group she believes most of them to be shallow, egocentric, and feeble in morality. Unfortunately, within her restricted social circle the potential candidates to be her future husband most possibly fall into that category. While there is a brilliant image of an ideal lover—the Byronic hero of her creation—in her mind, to condescend to marry a man so far below is out of the question. In Shirley Caroline Helstone is placed in the same dilemma, and she assumes the resolute attitude similar to Brontë’s. Caroline has always craved for a loving family of her own. But as soon as she sees that her hope to be united with her

\(^{18}\) Alexander 195.  
\(^{19}\) Alexander 196.  
\(^{20}\) Alexander 212.  
\(^{22}\) Letter to Ellen Nussey, 4 Aug. 1839: *Letters*, vol. 1, 198.
beloved Robert Moore is extinguished, she declares immediately that it is her destiny to be an old maid. That is because she will never marry any of the silly, worthless curates, whereas no one else will ever marry her since she has neither money nor connections.

To Brontë, “passion” seems to be an essential issue in relation to love and connection between man and woman; however, her attitude towards “passion” is at once ambivalent and complicated. On the one hand, when it concerns her own marriage issue she puts passion and love as the supreme rule of guidance; on the other, when she acts as a counselor to Ellen on the same topic, she gravely urges her friend not to be blinded by love or misled by passion. What makes her desirous of but at the same time distrust these feelings? The reason for such ambivalence is obvious: Brontë doubts that a man could be faithful and constant as a woman could in a love affair. Her long-term juvenile hero, the Byronic Zamorna, is a good example in illustrating Brontë’s reservations about man’s love. Similar to those charming heroes under Lord Byron’s pen, Zamorna never ceases to fall in love with different women and then abandon them one by one; he has been married several times, and has many extra-marital relationships. Those women who love him inevitably suffer from his faithlessness and inescapably have their hearts broken. The only way for a woman to avoid love hurt, Brontë advocates, is to caution against her natural inclination to romance. In her letter to Ellen dated 15 May 1840, Brontë advised her friend that it was better to marry a man whom she could respect than someone she loved. She expressed her conviction that intense passion was “no desirable feeling” because

In the first place, it seldom or never meets with a requital; and, in the second place, if it did, the feeling would be only temporary; it would last the honeymoon, and then, perhaps, give place to disgust or indifference . . .

Certainly this would be the case on the man’s part; and on the
woman’s—God help her, if she is left to love passionately and alone.\textsuperscript{23}

Six months later she once again elaborates on her concept regarding how a woman should love wisely and guard against being hurt by her own passion. This time she promotes an even more prudent and drawn-back procedure: no young lady should fall in love till she is proposed to, “the marriage ceremony performed,” and “the first half year of wedded life has passed away”; until then, a woman may “begin to love, but with great precaution—very coolly—very moderately—very rationally.”\textsuperscript{24} If she allows herself to love so much that a harsh look or a bitter word from her husband will make her heart bleed; if she depends her happiness solely on his mood and will, she is a pathetic fool and will be soon neglected and despised. Brontë pronounces decisively “une grande passion is une grande folie.”\textsuperscript{25} Here is a paradox we certainly will not miss. Though in her letter Brontë has been very calm and reasonable in arguing that if a man possesses a respectable character then there will surely be moderate love cultivated in the marriage life, she herself still did not agree to marry Henry whom she had esteemed.

To Brontë it seems that only women need to learn how to control their passion for self-protection. Her heroines are continually reminding themselves to restrain their affections, while the male protagonists are usually portrayed as the embodiments of ardent passion (for example, Edward Rochester and M. Paul), and Brontë scarcely makes them try to curb their emotions. This phenomenon indicates that Brontë believes that there is inherent difference in man’s and woman’s attitudes to and standpoints in the issue of love. In \textit{Villette}, when little Paulina bemoans that young Graham does not care for her as much as she cares for him, young Lucy tells her that it must be so because boys and girls are different by nature; a man can be the whole world to a woman while her place in his heart is behind many other detracting factors in his life. Thus Lucy exhorts Paulina: “don’t fret, and don’t expect too

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\textsuperscript{23} Letter to Ellen Nussey, 15 May 1840: \textit{Letters}, vol. 1, 218.  \\
\textsuperscript{24} Letter to Ellen Nussey, 20 Nov. 1840: \textit{Letters}, vol. 1, 234.  \\
\textsuperscript{25} Letter to Ellen Nussey, 20 Nov. 1840: \textit{Letters}, vol. 1, 233.
\end{flushleft}
much of him, or else he will feel you to be troublesome, and then it is all over” (*Villette* 91). As Janice Carlisle correctly remarks, this illustrates “what Lucy knows to be the basic structure of human relationships: emotional bonds are forged by the pressure of a woman’s great need, and they are inevitably disrupted by ‘fate’ or a man’s fickle indifference.”26 In *Shirley* Caroline delivers a similar viewpoint: “men and women are so different . . . you may have a friendship for a man, while he is almost indifferent to you. Much of what cheers your life may be dependent on him, while not a feeling or interest of moment in his eyes may have reference to you” (*Shirley* 229). Caroline once believes that she and Robert share mutual affection, hence his abrupt transition from tenderness to coldness wounds her terribly. Although she suffers great pain from her unrequited love, she attributes this anguish to her own doing—it is her own fault to love without being asked to love. To avoid further humiliation, she must take the matters as she finds it: ask no questions and utter no remonstrances. Here the earnest narrator on the surface gives a lecture to Caroline, but actually addresses all the female readers: “if [you] have sense, [you] will be [your] own governor, and resolve to subdue and bring under guidance the disturbed realm of [your] emotions” (*Shirley* 107). If a woman exercises such reason and self-discipline and survives the test, in time she will become “stronger, wiser, less sensitive” (*Shirley* 105). Some may say that Caroline’s diffidence in love is due to her lack of familial support and fortune, but it is difficult to explain Shirley’s mentality. Shirley is on a far more advantageous footing: she is a young heiress who has beauty, wealth and high social rank joining together to work as her backing. Nevertheless, she shares with Caroline her pessimism about love and marriage. She repeatedly stresses that she could not bear the idea of being “a burden and a bore,” that she is afraid of being tired of by the man she loves because it might be inevitably in man’s nature to be “fickle, soon petrifying, unsympathizing.” The authoress, through her heroine

Shirley, hereby denounces passion as “a mere fire of dry sticks, blazing up and vanishing” (Shirley 217).

**Brontë’s Concept of “Ideal Man”**

Even though Brontë saw passion as a dangerous thing that women must beware of, her heroines cannot help but being absorbed in passionate love when their lovers come along. In the light of the recurrent master-pupil theme in Brontë’s novels, we can reckon that Brontë has a critical standard for an ideal lover, and that standard is rather consistent. As Gérin points out, to Brontë, the ideal hero must be “saturnine, faithless, proud, disillusioned, masterful, melancholy, abrupt, a man of mystery with a past that can only be conjectured.”

We sense that William Crimsworth, Edward Rochester, the two Moore brothers, and M. Paul all possess more or less the above characteristics. Françoise Basch also summarizes that, except for Robert Moore, Brontë’s heroes share “an exotic and mysterious dimension, rough appearance and behavior, a certain lack of social polish that shock and attract their matches.”

They may not always excite the same feeling of appreciation and admiration in readers, but Brontë and her heroines are irresistibly attracted to this kind of Byronic men. Just as Basch describes, “through the intensity of their gaze, the asymmetry of their features, the expression of their torment,” they express “the virile strength and impassioned temperament to which the heroines aspire.”

We can further infer that when Brontë’s heroines fall in love, it is essential for them to believe that their men are their superiors therefore entitled to be worshipped. Shirley’s high evaluation of men is exemplary:

> when they are good, they are the lords of the creation,— they are the sons of God. Moulded in their Maker’s image, the minutest spark of His spirit

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27 Gérin 89.
29 Basch 166.
lifts them almost above morality. Indisputably, a great, good, handsome man is the first of created things. (*Shirley* 219)

When asked whether she thinks man is superior to woman, Shirley answers: “I would score to contend for empire with him . . . Shall my left hand dispute for precedence with my right?” She claims that nothing could charm her more than when she meets her superior, because “it degrades to stoop—it is glorious to look up” (*Shirley* 219). Shirley is not alone in deifying her lover; Brontë’s other heroines waste no time in joining the chorus to sing the praises of their beloved men. Jane claims:

> My future husband was becoming to me my whole world; and more than the world: almost my hope of heaven. He stood between me and every thought of religion . . . I could not, in those days, see God for his creature: of whom I had made an idol. (*Jane Eyre* 241)

Lucy is no less enthusiastic in her eulogy of M. Paul’s vigor, erudition, goodness, and trueness. She asserts: “He was my king; royal for me had been that hand’s bounty; to offer homage was both a joy and a duty” (*Villette* 587). In a gesture of paying tribute to his hand, Lucy thus declares her perpetually voluntary subordination to M. Paul. Patricia Thomson acutely points out that Brontë’s heroines are always willing to “assume a subaltern role” when they meet their match. “Once their hearts are given to the men of their choice,” Thomson observes, “[Brontë’s] heroines are always ardently disposed to acknowledge them their masters.”

> However, it is a pity that such a great, good, handsome “lord of the creation,” “son of God” is not everywhere to be found, and hence Shirley ends her eulogies of men by bringing the hard fact to the readers: “when I try to esteem, I am baffled: when religiously inclined, there are but false gods to adore” (*Shirley* 219). Even though a woman is lucky enough to find her ideal man, more often than not this man has to marry someone else for wealth or

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connections, instead of the good, intelligent woman who could bring him real happiness in life. Brontë was not too naïve to know that marriage of convenience was a most common practice in her time. That is why Jane Eyre does not condemn Rochester’s presumed intention of marrying Blanche for interests and connections; though she secretly admits that she has regarded him a man “unlikely to be influenced by motives so commonplace in his choice of a wife,” and that if she were a man of his position she would marry only the true love (Jane Eyre 165). Despite that, Jane is magnanimous enough to search for reasons in justification of Rochester: people of his class all hold this principle; hence they are only acting in conformity to ideas instilled into them. Similarly, Caroline never blames Robert for proposing to Shirley the rich heiress whom he does not really love. In Villette, while everyone in the pensionnat believes that Madame Beck is going to marry Dr. John, Lucy ponders over the probability of such a union. She first measures the advantages Dr. John would gain from this marriage: He has no money; therefore he must depend upon his profession for living. But if he marries Madame, he could be spared a lot of efforts. Madame will “[take] him to her well-furnished home, [endow] him with her savings . . . and [make] him comfortable for the rest of his life” (Villette 167). Lucy suspects Dr. John not in love with Madame, but she instantly answers herself by asking a question: “[How] many people ever do love, or at least marry for love in the world?” (Villette 167). This is a material world. For the same reason, though Lucy bitterly points out that if she possessed the additional advantages of wealth and station, she would be of greater value to Dr. John; she nevertheless accepts resignedly the reality that Dr. John would eventually take to Paulina who surpasses her in terms of beauty, rank, and resources, though not in intelligence.

The Meaning of Work to Single Women

What, then, are the choices left for women who have neither fortune nor beauty? Brontë suggested that those women had better “be quiet & think of other things than
wedlock.” What are these “other things” to be thought of by those women? All of her novels point to the same answer: to get a profession and to depend on oneself for living. Brontë’s notion that a single woman should strive for her independence through the acquisition of a job was well ahead of her time. It was a time when women were exhorted to be domestic creatures, and the society generally “prescribed for a woman in the home an ornamental, metaphysical and morally inspiring role,” to use Basch’s words. Men of upper and middle classes considered it an honor to be able to support the female members of their families. It was even envied as a privilege, that upper-class women could live a life of luxury and idleness. Though the 1851 census showed that there were already three-quarters of single females living on their own wages, it was still difficult for middle-class women to adapt to the reality that they must earn their own living. It was usually domestic adversities, such as the breakdown of home economy or the demise of the principal male provider, which forced middle-class women to seek a livelihood. But even if they lost their money, they would never lose their dignity. Their choice of profession was therefore seriously limited. As Basch explains, “it was not respectable to work with one’s hands, or in commerce, which implied the manipulation of money.” Due to their unwavering insistence on middle-class respectability, many thus considered to become a governess or a schoolteacher “the only means by which a woman not born in the servile classes [could] earn the means of subsistence.” Charlotte Brontë and her sisters had been governesses themselves, therefore she knew by heart the mental suffering and physical hardship of this profession. There were all kinds of psychological pressure: separation from her home, being a stranger in another family, the indifference or the contempt from the employers, hostility from the servants, 

32 Basch 103.
33 Basch 105.
34 Basch 109.
35 Basch 110. Certainly there were other women, such as Charlotte Brontë herself, who earned their living as authors. But these are very rare cases proportionately.
anxiety and diffidence due to lack of experience or sufficient education and so on. Governess was often given tasks that belonged to lady’s maid or nurse. Her position in the family was ambiguous and ill-defined. Brontë has personally experienced or heard from her sisters all these, yet in real life she still believed that a single woman should seek a job to achieve independence, instead of depending on her father’s or brother’s charity for living. She spared no effort in promoting this idea to her friends. On hearing that one of W. S. Williams’s daughters was preparing for a presentation to Queen’s College, she wrote to him commending that it was his daughter’s first step towards independency. Brontë believed that dependency was a great curse of a single female life, and she earnestly declared that the dignity of self-dependence could counteract the evils of working as a teacher:

Your daughters . . . should aim at making their way honourably through life . . . teachers may be hard-worked, ill-paid and despised—but the girl who stays at home doing nothing is worse off than the hardest-wrought and worst paid drudge of a school.\(^{36}\)

Brontë also mentioned in the same letter that she had seen girls sitting at home waiting to be married, and remarked that it was a pitiable scene. If fate did not decree the girls a happy marriage, she continued, it was necessary to “give their existence some object—their time some occupation—or the peevishness of disappointment and the listlessness of idleness will infallibly degrade their nature.”\(^ {37}\) Brontë’s creed is enforced by her heroines: Caroline seeks to work as a governess when she believes that her hope to become a wife and mother is totally shattered; working as the mistress to the village school, Jane Eyre devotes herself to the service of the poor villagers after the painful separation from Mr. Rochester; Lucy Snowe willingly operates her school with diligence while M. Paul is abroad because she deems herself the steward of M. Paul’s property. At this point we must stress that none of Brontë’s

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heroines has the ambition to attain fame, fortune, or self-fulfillment through work. To them, a career is of a practical function, a pragmatic aim. For a lovelorn woman, such as Caroline and Jane, an occupation can fill up the void left by what she has lost or cannot possess—her husband, her children, her own family which she could dedicate her whole love, care, and energy to; the labor that a job demands can occupy her thoughts, fill up her time, give varieties of pain, and “prevent [her] from breaking [her] heart with a single tyrant master-torture,” to quote Caroline’s words (Shirley 229).

Brontë herself does not really like the job as a governess or a teacher. The immediate reason is that she loathes the tiresomeness of teaching students not clever. Another important reason is that this job demands all her labor and exhausts her energy, so much so that she has no time for her favorite literary creation. There were a lot of complaints about her drudgery and descriptions of her frustrations in her Roe Head journals (1835-1837) and the letters of the same period. On 11 August 1836 Brontë wrote in her journal:

The parsing lesson was completed . . . I sat sinking from irritation and weariness into a kind of lethargy. The thought came over me am I to spend all the best part of my life in this wretched bondage forcibly suppressing my rage at the idleness the apathy and the hyperbolical and most asinine stupidity of those fat-headed oafs and on compulsion assuming an air of kindness patience and assiduity? Must I from day to day sit chained to this chair prisoned within these four bare walls, while . . . the time I am losing, will never come again?38

On this point, her heroines have also expressed the same sentiments. Obviously, Jane Eyre does not consider teaching her vocation. Educating Adèle does not bring her great pleasure; she is simply carrying out the duties she is paid for. After leaving Thornfield, Jane is put in charge of a school for the poor country girls by St. John’s arrangement. It is her

38 Gérin 103-4.
responsibility to “develop the germs of native excellence, refinement, intelligence, kind feeling in her scholars” (Jane Eyre 316). The task is noble, but she feels desolate and degraded. She admits: “I was weakly dismayed at the ignorance, the poverty, the coarseness of all I heard and saw round me” (Jane Eyre 316). She feels that she has taken a step that sinks instead of raising herself in the scale of social existence. What Jane displays is the middle-class intellectual’s sense of superiority while in the face of the uneducated working class. Though she grows to see the goodness in her students’ nature and generates warm feelings towards them, she still keeps on referring to them in a patronizing way. Once there is opportunity to leave, she does not hesitate to give up the school and her students. As Basch remarks, besides material sustenance, Jane draws from her task of teaching “only moral satisfaction: a sense of duty accomplished and pride at having faced up to an additional ordeal.”

As for Lucy Snowe, her aversion to the girl students is openly disclosed. Lucy enumerates relentlessly all the flaws and defects of her wealthy students: their indifference, inertness, vanity, coquetry, duplicity, stupidity, and so on. Lucy’s idea of establishing her own school is not motivated by some sort of enthusiasm for education. In fact, it is not until she concludes that she would not be able to get married that she begins to speculate on this possibility. This project appeals to her because, by running her own school, she can certainly make more money and have more autonomy. A similar case can be found in The Professor. Frances Henri has had the most unpleasant teaching experiences in Mdlle. Reuter’s establishment; she is constantly jeered and disobeyed by her students. But she still insists on working as a teacher after getting married. Frances’s reason for keeping her job is not to compete with her husband, but that she is unwilling to become a burden to him. Her true wish is to join her efforts with her husband for the benefits of their family.

There is still another reason contributing to Brontë’s idea that single female must have a profession. In Brontë’s religious doctrines there is the belief that assiduity and successful

39 Basch 155.
labor have their recompense, and Brontë disagrees with the kind of idle, dissipated life that the ladies of high society lead. Being the eldest daughter who survived in a poor parsonage, Brontë always considered it her duty to exert herself for the benefits of her family members. To know that her efforts help to advance her kindred’s happiness was a great comfort to her own mental and physical sufferings. The household situation has forced her to seek the way to achieve financial independence and security; but once she tasted that self-dependence and the ensuing freedom, she enjoyed the relish so much that she wished to remain her own mistress in a way. Here, we perceive another element of Brontë’s hesitancy towards marriage. Though envious of the rapture of loving and being loved, the happiness of wedlock and domesticity, as a female artist gifted with creative talents, Brontë also craved for the freedom to dedicate her time and mind to literary creation. The writing career satisfied her both intellectually and substantially; she dreaded that to become wife to somebody would deprive her of the freedom to dominate her own life, and of the dignity to be the financial supporter to herself and her family. Hence, it is not surprising to read about Frances Henri’s insistence on maintaining her teaching job and Shirley’s dread of ceasing to be her own mistress after marriage.

**True Love: the Unremitting Longing**

Brontë has untiringly reminded herself that she should endeavor to be rational rather than sentimental when dealing with the issues of love and passion, marriage and celibacy. As a woman, she believes that if she wishes to evade the misery of getting heartbroken, she must not indulge her passion and has to restrain her love cautiously; but deep down in her heart she still pines after the ecstasy of fulfilled love. In Brontë’s mind, there has always been the sublime image of the ideal lover; but more importantly, she will only marry someone
who is congenial to her in tastes, feelings, and principles. Her standard for choosing a husband is strict already, whereas in *Villette* Brontë further brings up a deep sense of fatalism. The novel’s end signifies that even when a woman is lucky enough to find her Mr. Right, it still rests in God’s will whether the two will be blessed with the bliss of union. However, it seems that Brontë is still willing to believe that there may be the existence of her ideal of love in this world, because she eventually allows her dreams to be fulfilled in her novels, in which happy ending prevails for her heroes and heroines. Crimsworth and Frances Henri prosper after marriage; struggling through all the ordeals, Jane finally gets to marry her master whom she deeply loves; both Caroline and Shirley are happily united with their beloved men. The only exception is *Villette*. Although Brontë has personally confirmed that she intended the ending to be ambiguous, the following interpretation is still the most widely accepted: M. Paul is drowned on his voyage back to redeem his pledge to marry Lucy. Lucy’s prospect to a happy marriage is thwarted; hence she appears to be not so fortunate as the other heroines in Brontë’s novels. However, it cannot be denied that Lucy has her own recompense—she has been blessed with a most precious love. M. Paul is faithful and thoughtful, tender and true. Lucy is “penetrated with his influence, and living by his affection, having his worth by intellect, and his goodness by heart” (*Villette* 592). He allows her to keep her own religion without asking her to convert to his; he not only encourages Lucy’s project in establishing her own school but also practically assists her to make the first move towards independence (on this point M. Paul is more enlightened and advanced than Crimsworth, who initially feels his pride injured by Frances Henri’s determination to keep her job). Lucy thus says: “Once in their lives some men and women go back to their first fresh days of our great Sire and Mother—taste that grand mornings’ dew—bathe in its sunrise” (*Villette* 592). To be able to love and be loved in this way is compared to the return to Eden. With such an ending, Brontë is actually suggesting to her readers that a happy ending is after all not the most

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40 Gérin 517.
important thing in the experience of love.

Many critics complain that Charlotte Brontë has put too much emphasis on the issue of love in *Villette*, and Harriet Martineau is one among them. Her criticism is as follows:

All the female characters, in all their thoughts and lives, are full of one thing, or are regarded by the reader in the light of that one thought—love... so dominant is this idea—so incessant is the writer’s tendency to describe the need of being loved, that the heroine... either entertained a double love, or allowed one to supersede another without notification of the transition. It is not thus in real life. There are substantial, heartfelt interests for women of all ages, and under ordinary circumstances, quite apart from love...\(^{41}\)

When Martineau speaks of other women who have more significant things other than love to concern about, she must have thought of herself as one example. She is absolutely correct in saying that love is not the only thing that matters to all women. Many Victorian women have surely devoted themselves to their works, such as Florence Nightingale’s devotion in the improvement of nursing, or Martineau and other feminists’ dedication to the promotion of women’s benefits. However, while to serve the country or to be professionally successful might be some women’s goals in life, they are certainly not what Brontë’s heroines aspire to. To Brontë, a loving matrimony is indeed the most desirable life style for a woman. Her heroines dread a loveless, old maid’s life. They have tried to encourage themselves by reasoning that an old maid can at least be proud of the independence they work hard for, and that she can do good to others; but in the end they inevitably admit that such an object in life is “too selfish, too limited,” and “lacks interest” (*Villette* 450). This mentality is best interpreted in Lucy’s moans:

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[Is] there nothing more for me in life—no true home—nothing to be dearer to me than myself, and by its paramount preciousness, to draw from me better things than I care to culture for myself only? Nothing, at whose feet I can willingly lay down the whole burden of human egotism, and gloriously take up the nobler charge of labouring and living for others?

(*Villette* 450-51)

Each of Brontë’s heroines longs for a marriage contracted in love or a sense of emotional belonging. A job is important only when there is no alternative to her. Thomson correctly observes that, in Brontë’s contemporary period, “the majority of feminists would, however, have been quite willing to agree that marriage was a far better thing on the whole than a career. All that most of them desired was to have work thrown open to women who wished to take advantage of it.”

This is also what Brontë asks for. Her heroines are ready and willing at any time to merge into an ideal companionate marriage, in which man and wife’s intelligence, taste, and sentiment are compatible. It is her wish that a man can appreciate his wife’s intellectual capacity; while on the wife’s side, “when satisfied with a certain degree of self-expression the heroine is happy to abdicate totally before a superior personality.”

She is willing to call her man “master,” and she will strive to become an excellent wife—“study his comfort, and cherish him, and do [her] best to make him happy” (*Shirley* 100). In short, Brontë eventually agrees with the conventional idea of her age, that a loving matrimony is where a woman should belong.

After examining Brontë’s biographical documents and the everlasting subject of love and marriage in her novels, one is compelled to believe that her novels, to a great extent, have reflected the authoress’s real thoughts in real life. Though from time to time Brontë does show her skepticism about the general reader’s ability to interpret her works correctly,
yet she never intends her narrators to deceive or mislead the reader on purpose. In fact, Brontë has always been preoccupied with delivering the truth that she knows of through her novels. This is also the reason for her recurrent adoption of a first-person narrator to tell the story. The recurrence of a first-person narrator testifies to Brontë’s willingness to confide in her readers and her serious aspirations to influence them. On the other hand, Brontë has undoubtedly chosen the writing of novels for her means of satisfying her desire for self-expression. Therefore, if we accept the assumption that the author’s sincerity is one of the most significant factors in an autobiography, it is then reasonable to argue that Brontë’s novels can legitimately be considered her autobiographies transfigured or transformed.
### Appendix

**William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-63)**

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Selected Bibliography

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