

AN EVALUATION OF CHARLOTTE BRONTE'S THREE MAJOR
NOVELS BASED ON A STUDY OF THE CHANGING
STANDARDS OF LITERARY CRITICISM

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BY
JACQUIE PATTERSON, B. A.

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We hereby recommend that the thesis prepared under
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Committee

Constance L. Beach

Chairman

Mary W. ...

Accepted:

[Signature]
Director of Graduate Studies

PREFACE

The purpose of this thesis is to evaluate the three major novels of Charlotte Bronte on the basis of the changing standards of literary criticism in order to try to discover the reasons for her enduring popularity and fame. In order to accomplish this purpose, the study has been divided into three parts. Chapter I traces Charlotte Bronte's rise to fame through an account of the origin and publication of her novels, the reception of each by the general reading public and by the critics, and Charlotte's reaction to these criticisms. Chapter II traces the status of the woman novelist through previous years, in order to provide an understanding of the biased attitude of certain critics toward the novels after the disclosure of Charlotte Bronte's identity, and describes Charlotte's struggle against the unfair standards of criticism and its outcome. Chapter III presents an analysis of the artistry of her novels in order to discover reasons for her enduring fame in the uniqueness of her contribution to English fiction.

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CHAPTER I

THE FAMOUS WRITER

What were the steps by which an unprepossessing daughter of a country clergyman rose to fame, winning the acclaim of both the popular Victorian audience and discerning critics?

Although Jane Eyre was Charlotte Bronte's first published novel, it was not the author's first publication or her first attempt at fiction. The Brontes were, to say the least, remarkable children. At an early age they wrote prodigious quantities of poems, tales, novels, and dramas. These were written in tiny notebooks (2½ by 4¼ inches) in the very smallest of scripts. The children were extremely well versed in the current events of the day, for as a result of their seclusion, they read assiduously. They never played energetically; instead they wrote plays and acted them. The heroes of their dramas were well-known people. Charlotte's favorite hero was the Duke of Wellington. He and his sons, the Marquis of Douro and Lord Charles Wellesley, appear in a hundred romances which she wrote in microscopic lettering before she was fourteen. Branwell was the originator of a magazine which he entitled "Branwell's Blackwood's Magazine Chief Glass Town, Printed and Sold by

Sergeant Tree." The leading article of this magazine was written by Charlotte. She persuaded Branwell to start a newspaper and leave her the magazine, which she then entitled "Blackwood's Young Mens Magazine Edited by the Genius C. B. Printed by Captain Tree and Sold by Captain Cary, Sergeant Blood, and Corporal Lidell."¹

The children did not show each other all of their writing. It was, therefore, quite by accident that Charlotte, in 1846, discovered Emily's notebook which contained her poems. Charlotte, believing the poems to be of considerable merit, began at once to convince Emily that their publication would be desirable. At this time Anne, seeing that Charlotte was pleased with Emily's verse, produced some of her own; and Charlotte, who had written many poems in her childhood, decided that they must bring out a joint volume, published under the names of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell.

After much correspondence with Messrs. Aylott and Jones, they published their poems at their own expense in May, 1846. The small, one hundred and sixty-five-page book sold only two copies in spite of favorable reviews in the Critic and the Athenaeum. Charlotte felt, in later years,

¹Fannie E. Ratchford, The Brontes' Web of Childhood (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), p. 25.

that only Emily's poems should have been published. Hers and Anne's detracted from the merit of the book.¹

The sisters must have begun to write their novels in the autumn of 1845, because Charlotte informed the publishers of their existence while the poems were being printed. Emily's Wuthering Heights, Anne's Agnes Grey, and Charlotte's The Professor were sent to the publishers but were not accepted for a year and a half. It was in 1846, while Charlotte was in Manchester with her father for an eye operation, that she began another novel, Jane Eyre. In 1847 she sent The Professor, a one-volume novel, to Messrs. Smith and Elder, but her manuscript was returned with a letter stating that a three-volume novel would receive careful reading.² Jane Eyre, begun at Manchester nearly a year earlier, was almost finished by now, and upon its completion it was sent to the publishers.

The first edition of Jane Eyre, published in 1847, was an immediate success with both the reading public and the literary world. The Athenaeum and the Spectator in short notices admitted the power of the author, but the Literary Gazette was uncertain whether or not it was safe to praise an unknown author. The Westminster Review hailed

¹E. F. Benson, Charlotte Bronte (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1932), p. 163.

²Ibid., p. 195.

Jane Eyre as "Decidedly the best novel of the season,"¹ and the Newcastle Guardian seemed to think it a mild potion which might be "safely administered to the most delicate invalid."²

In a letter to Mrs. Hope, John Lockhart wrote:

I have finished the adventures of Miss Jane Eyre, and think her far the cleverest that has written since Austen and Edgeworth were in their prime. Worth fifty Trollopes and Martineaus rolled into one counterpane, with fifty Dickenses and Bulwers to keep them company-- but rather a brazen Miss.--³

William Makepeace Thackeray wrote in a letter to her publishers:

It interested me so much that I have lost (or won if you like) a whole day in reading it. It is a fine book though, the man and woman capital, the style very generous and upright so to speak. Some of the love passages made me cry. There are parts excellent. I don't know why I tell you this but that I have been exceedingly moved and pleased by Jane Eyre. Who the author can be I can't guess, if a woman she knows her language better than most ladies do, or has had a "classical" education. It is a woman's writing, but whose? Give my respects and thanks to the author, whose novel is the first English one (and the French are only romances now) that I've been able to read for many a day.⁴

Thackeray's praise was particularly pleasing to Charlotte because she already admired his work, and his admiration of

¹Basil Blackwell, ed., The Brontes, Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence in Four Volumes (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1932), II, 145.

²Clement Shorter, The Brontes and Their Circle (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1914), p. 380.

³Charles Wells Moulton, ed., The Library of Literary Criticism of English and American Authors (New York: Peter Smith, 1935), VI, 22.

⁴Blackwell, p. 149.

Jane Eyre increased her belief in his judgment. "No author," she wrote, "seems to distinguish so exquisitely as he does dross from ore, the real from counterfeit."¹

The reviews did little to further the sale of the book. It was the power of the tale itself that made its merits known to the public.² Early in December, 1847, the rush for copies began, and in 1848 the second edition of Jane Eyre, containing no less than seven pages of "opinions of the press," was published.³ This second edition was dedicated to Thackeray. The following quotations will serve as a summary of the effect of Jane Eyre on the reading public of the nineteenth century. Edwin Percy Whipple, in 1848, wrote:

Not many months ago, the New England States were visited by a distressing mental epidemic, passing under the name of the "Jane Eyre fever," which defied all the usual nostrums of the established doctors of criticism. Its effects varied with different constitutions, in some producing a soft ethical sentimentality, which relaxed all the fibres of conscience, and in others exciting a general fever of moral and religious indignation. It was to no purpose that the public were solemnly assured, through the intelligent press, that the malady was not likely to have any permanent effect either on the intellectual or moral constitution. The book which caused the distemper would probably have been inoffensive, had not some sly manufacturer of mischief hinted that it was a volume

¹Benson, p. 197.

²Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, The Life of Charlotte Bronte (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1936), p. 226.

³Blackwell, p. 145.

which no respectable man should bring into his family circle. Of course, every family soon had a copy of it, and one edition after another found eager purchasers.¹

T. Wemyss Reid, in 1877, stated:

Those who remember the winter of nine-and twenty years ago know how something like a "Jane Eyre" fever raged among us. The story which had suddenly discovered a glory in uncomeliness, a grandeur in overmastering passion, moulded the fashion of the hour, and "Rochester airs" and "Jane Eyre graces" became the rage. The book, and its fame and influence, travelled beyond the seas with a speed which in those days was marvellous. In sedate New England homes the history of the English governess was read with an avidity which was not surpassed in London itself, and within a few months of the publication of the novel it was famous throughout two continents. No such triumph has been achieved in our time by any other English author; nor can it be said, upon the whole, that many triumphs have been better merited. It happened that this anonymous story, bearing the unmistakable marks of an unpracticed hand, was put before the world at the very moment when another great masterpiece of fiction was just beginning to gain the ear of the English public. But at the moment of publication "Jane Eyre" swept past "Vanity Fair" with a marvellous and impetuous speed which left Thackeray's work in the distant background; and its unknown author in a few weeks gained a wider reputation than that which one of the master minds of the century had been engaged for long years in building up. The reaction from this exaggerated fame, of course, set in, and it was sharp and severe.²

Laura Holloway, in 1883, commented:

The story of Charlotte Bronte's life is one of the most fascinating in our language. The English reading world is acquainted with her novels, and many have enjoyed "Jane Eyre" as much perhaps as did a

¹T. Wemyss Reid, Charlotte Bronte: A Monograph (New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Co., 1877), p. 8.

²Quoted in Moulton, VI, 24, from E. P. Whipple's Novels of the Season, Essays and Reviews, II, 355.

mother of several grown-up daughters who took the book from one of them with a reproof for reading a novel--something she had never done, and who was discovered in the night poring over it. She had opened it to see what it was, and had remained up all night to settle the question for herself.--¹

In two letters to W. S. Williams, the reader for the house of Smith and Elder, Charlotte communicated her reaction to the criticisms voiced on Jane Eyre:

December 31, 1847

Dear Sir,--You do very rightly and very kindly to tell me the objections made against Jane Eyre--they are more essential than the praises. I feel a sort of heart-ache when I hear the book called "godless" and "pernicious" by good and earnest-minded men; but I know that heart-ache will be salutary--at least I trust so.

What is meant by the charges of trickery and artifice I have yet to comprehend. It was no art in me to write a tale--it was no trick in Messrs. Smith and Elder to publish it. Where do the trickery and artifice lie?

I have received the Scotsman, and was greatly amused to see Jake Eyre likened to Rebecca Sharp--the resemblance would hardly have occurred to me.²

Haworth, January 4, 1848

Dear Sir,--Your letter made me ashamed of myself that I should ever have uttered a murmur, or expressed any sign of some misjudging but well-meaning people. But, indeed, let me assure you, I am not ungrateful for the kindness which has been given me in such abundant measure. I am not therefore crushed, though I may be momentarily saddened by the frown, even of the good.

It would take a great deal to crush me, because I know, in the first place, that my own intentions

¹Ibid., quoted from Laura Hollaway's "An Hour with Charlotte Bronte," p. 7.

²Shorter, p. 309.

were correct, that I feel in my heart a deep reverence for religion, that impiety is very abhorrent to me; and in the second, I place firm reliance on the judgment of some who have encouraged me. You and Mr. Lewes are quite as good authorities, in my estimation, as Mr. Dilke or the editor of the Spectator, and I would not under any circumstances, or for any approbrium, regard with shame what my friends had approved--none but a coward would let the detraction of an enemy outweigh the encouragement of a friend.¹

Shirley, Charlotte Bronte's second novel, was started during a period of great personal sorrow. When she had nearly completed the second volume of her tale, Branwell died, in September, 1848; then Emily, in December, 1848; then Anne, in May, 1849. The first chapter was aptly entitled "The Valley of the Shadow of Death." Her writing served as an anodyne for her anguish. In a letter to Mr. Williams, in August, 1849, she wrote, "The occupation of writing it has been a boon to me. It took me out of dark and desolate reality into an unreal and happier region."²

When Charlotte began Shirley, she strove to please her publishers and her public. She carefully studied the different reviews and criticisms of Jane Eyre that had appeared in the hope of gaining profitable advice. In a letter to H. G. Lewes in 1848 concerning his criticism of Jane Eyre and his recommendation that she limit her writing

¹Ibid., p. 310.

²W. Bertram White, The Miracle of Haworth (London: University of London Press, 1937), p. 284.

to material with which she was familiar, Charlotte indicated her intention of trying to improve her future works:

I mean to observe your warning about being careful now I undertake new works; my stock of materials is not abundant, but very slender; and, besides, neither my experience, my acquirements, nor my powers, are sufficiently varied to justify my ever becoming a frequent writer. I tell you this, because your article in Fraser left in me an uneasy impression that you were disposed to think better of the author of Jane Eyre than that individual deserved; and I would rather you had a correct than a flattering opinion of me, even though I should never see you.

If I ever do write another book, I think I will have nothing of what you call 'melodrama'; I think so, but I am not sure. I think, too, I will endeavour to follow the counsel which shines out of Miss Austen's 'mild eyes,' 'to finish more and be more subdued'; but neither am I sure of that.¹

When she sought a subject for her next work, the incidents connected with the Luddite riots which had surrounded the community at Roe Head, where Charlotte had attended school, came to mind. She read the complete files of the Leed's Mercury of 1812, 1813, and 1814, from which she took the material on which she based her book. Shirley is set in the Yorkshire neighborhood. Charlotte founded her story on the actual case of William Cartwright, who introduced machinery into his mill and was shot by one of his workmen.

Charlotte is one of the earliest women to devote any serious attention to the progress of trade and the

¹Gaskell, p. 261.

introduction of machinery with its effect on the social problems of the working class. It is in Shirley that for almost the first time a woman writer questioned the problems arising from the struggles between capital and labor--the risks attendant upon the introduction of machinery, the proper relations between master and men--which afterwards became part of the stock material for fiction.¹

Charlotte was concerned about the success of Shirley because just when the book was completed, Mrs. Gaskell published Mary Barton, which deals with a similar incident of the same period. Charlotte's alarm was unnecessary; the two books were too unlike for rivalry. Although each author treated both sides with justice and sympathy, Mrs. Gaskell wrote from the point of view of the starving workman, Charlotte from that of the struggling manufacturer.

Shirley was finished by the end of August, 1849, and published in three volumes on October 26, 1849, by Messrs. Smith, Elder and Company, who professed themselves delighted with it. The book was an instantaneous success, and Charlotte was once more overjoyed with the sure knowledge that her publishers had not been disappointed. The reviews were mixed, but there were several excellent

¹R. Brimley Johnson, The Women Novelists (London: W. Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1918), p. 177.

ones, including those of Harriet Martineau and Mrs. Gaskell. Charlotte was delighted, too, with the review in Revue des deux Mondes by Eugène Forçade.

In a letter to Ellen Nussey on November 22, 1849, Charlotte related the progress of Shirley:

Dear Ellen,

Shirley works her way. The reviews shower in fast-- I send you a couple more by this post--you may take care of them and bring them with the others. The best critique which has yet appeared is in the Revue des deux Mondes; a sort of European Cosmopolitan periodical whose headquarters are in Paris. Comparatively few reviewers--even in their praise--evinced a just comprehension of the author's meaning--Eugène Forçade--the reviewer in question--follows Currer Bell through every winding, discerns every point, discriminates every shade--proves himself master of the subject and lord of the inn. With that man I would shake hands if I saw him. I would say 'you know me, Monsieur-- I shall deem it an honour to know you.'

I could not say so much to the mass of London critics. Perhaps I could not say so much to five hundred men and women in all the millions of Great Britain. That matters little. My own Conscience I satisfy first--and, having done that--if I further content and delight a Forçade, a Fonglanque and a Thackeraye [sic]--my ambition has had its ration--it is fed--it lies down for the present satisfied--this work done--my faculties have wrought a day's task and earned a day's wages.¹

She also expressed her gratitude to Mrs. Gaskell and Harriet Martineau in this letter to W. S. Williams, in a letter dated November 24, 1849:

Dear Sir,

I inclose two notes for postage. The note you sent yesterday was from Harriet Martineau; its

¹Gaskell, p. 311.

contents were more than gratifying. I ought to be thankful, and I trust I am for such testimonies of sympathy from the first order of minds. When Mrs. Gaskell tells me she shall keep my works as a treasure for her daughters, and when Harriet Martineau testifies affectionate approbation, I feel the sting taken from the strictures of another class of critics. My resolution of seclusion withholds me from communicating further with these ladies at present, but I now know how they are inclined to me--I know how my writings have affected their wise and pure minds. The knowledge is present support and, perhaps, may be future armour.¹

The people of Haworth who were represented so truthfully in Shirley viewed the book in an extremely enthusiastic light. They cast lots for reading the three copies of Shirley which were in the possession of one of the guilds at Haworth. One could keep it only two days, and the fine for keeping it longer was a shilling a day. The scenes about the curates caused much foot-stamping and uproarious laughter. Enthusiasm was heightened by the realization that the author was a native of the town. The people of the surrounding countryside knew the place of residence of Currer Bell and came flocking to get a glimpse of her. The sexton is reported to have "gained many a half crown" for pointing her out as she went quietly and unconsciously into church.² Charlotte compared herself to the ostrich hiding its head in the sand and said that she still buried hers in the heath of Haworth moors; but she admitted, "The concealment is but self-delusion."³ She was,

¹Blackwell, III, 45.

²Gaskell, p. 319.

³Ibid., p. 318.

however, extremely touched that those who had known her from childhood were proud of her success.

Shirley was, however, not as popular as Jane Eyre. It lacked the reality and the fire of passion of Jane Eyre. Elizabeth Barrett Browning in a letter to Mrs. Jameson commented, "I have read Shirley lately; it is not equal to Jane Eyre in spontaneousness and earnestness. I found it heavy, I confess, though in the mechanical part of the writing--the compositional savoir faire--there is an advance;"¹ while Sydney Dobell observed, "Jane Eyre is the real spar--the slow deposit which the heart of genius filters from the daily stream of time and circumstance. Shirley is its companion, made to order, fair to look upon, but lacking the internal crystal."²

The main points of censure were the lack of continuity of plot and the irrelevance of most of the characters to the plot. In an article entitled "New Novels," published in Fraser's, occurred this censure:

The story is deficient in connection and interest. In Jane Eyre the reader accompanied the heroine throughout, saw with her eyes, heard with her ears, in short, lived over again one life, and regarded other persons and things from one point of view--the heroine's personality. On this ground an autobiography well done is sure of creating the most absorbing interest. But a story in the narrative form requires much more artistic skill in its construction. It is required to concentrate the

¹Moulton, VI, 27. Taken from The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, edited by Kenyon, I, 442.

²Ibid., p. 23.

interest upon one person or one group, while regarding that person or group, as well as the subordinate groups. The threads of intrigue must be so crossed and interlaced as to form but one pattern. Otherwise the reader's mind will have to make a painful effort (a sort of squint) to see two or more distinct things at once.

It might as well have been called Caroline, or Helstone, as far as that goes. Shirley, the heroine--for, masculine as the name sounds, Shirley is a woman--does not appear at all till the end of the first volume, and the hero only drops in at the end of the second. Besides, the stage is overcrowded with characters too insignificant to be named in the bills; some, mere sceneshifters and candlesnuffers, have no business to be there at all. Nearly a hundred characters to be disposed of! it could not be done, even with the 'resources' of Covent Garden.¹

This same viewpoint was expressed by H. G. Lewes in his article which appeared in the Edinburgh Review. Mr. Lewes said: "Shirley cannot be received as a work of art. It isn't a picture; but sketches for one or more pictures. The authoress doesn't seem to have made up her mind as to what she was to do; whether to describe the habits and manners of Yorkshire and its social aspects, or to paint character, or to tell a love story."² It was at this criticism in particular that Charlotte Bronte took offence. Her ire was directed against being criticized, so she believed, as a woman, and not as a writer. This point, however, will be considered in a later chapter.

¹"New Novels," Fraser's Magazine, XL (December, 1849), 692.

²"Shirley: A Tale. By Currer Bell, Author of Jane Eyre," Edinburgh Review, XCL (January, 1850), 160.

Lewis E. Gates, however, contended that Shirley was the novel in which Charlotte Bronte had "arrived"--the book in which she had made the world listen, and in which she felt that she had the right to speak:

The gain that Shirley shows in conscious breadth of outlook and in confidence of bearing,--in authority,--is noteworthy. The monotonous poignancy of Jane Eyre gives place in Shirley to a wide range of moods. The author escapes from the tyranny of a single, somewhat morbid, though courageous, temperament, and gives us incidents and characters with more of the checkered light upon them that ordinary mortals are from day to day aware of.

Shirley takes in, too, more of the light miscellaneousness of life than Jane Eyre,--more of its variegated surface. Jane Eyre concentrates all the interest on the struggle of two hearts with fate; Shirley, while loyal to the fortunes of a few principal characters, suggests the whole little world of the country-side, through conflict and cooperation with which these characters gain their strength and quality. At least it tries to suggest this world,--a world of curates, rectors, squires, and even labourers.¹

It was from Charlotte's conscious effort that most of her defects arose. Objective writing is far more difficult than subjective writing, and indeed Charlotte must have found it so, for she wrote to James Taylor: "I took great pains with Shirley. I did not hurry, I tried to do my best, and my own impression was that it was not inferior to the former work; indeed I had bestowed upon it more time, thought and anxiety; but a great part of it was written under

¹Lewis Gates, Studies and Appreciations (New York: Macmillan Co., 1900), p. 150.

the shadow of impending calamity, and the last volume I cannot deny was composed in the eager, restless endeavor to combat mental sufferings that were scarcely tolerable."¹

In the interval between the publication of Shirley in October, 1849, and the publication of Villette in January, 1853, Charlotte's literary fame grew. She made many trips to London, where she became acquainted with the literary giants of that era. It was as a result of these visits that the literary world was enabled to form a picture of this controversial author.

In November, 1849, Charlotte went to London to visit Mr. Smith and his mother. While visiting, she met Thackeray for the first time. Of this meeting Charlotte said, "With him I was painfully stupid."² Thackeray, however, does not give us that impression:

I saw her first just as I rose out of an illness from which I had never thought to recover. I remember the trembling little frame, the little hand, the great honest eyes. An impetuous honesty seemed to me to characterize the woman. New to the London world, she entered it with an independent, indomitable spirit of her own; and judged of contemporaries, and especially spied out arrogance or affection, with extraordinary keenness of vision.³

On subsequent visits with Thackeray, Charlotte overcame her shyness and enjoyed a lasting friendship with a man whom

¹Laura L. Hinkley, Charlotte and Emily (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1945), p. 277.

²White, p. 298.

³Ibid.

she greatly admired and respected, her literary idol, so to speak.

Thackeray's daughter, Lady Ritchie, wrote some years later an account of Charlotte, whom she had seen in June, 1850:

--a tiny, delicate, little person, whose small hand nevertheless grasped a mighty lever which set all the literary world of that day vibrating. I can still see the scene quite plainly--the hot summer evening, the open windows, the carriage driving to the door as we all sat silent and expectant; my father, who rarely waited, waiting with us; our governess and my sister and I all in a row and prepared for the great event. We saw the carriage stop, and out of it sprang the active, well-knit figure of Mr. George Smith, who was bringing Miss Bronte to see our father. My father, who had been walking up and down the room, goes out into the hall to meet his guests, and then, after a moment's delay, the door opens wide, and the two gentlemen come in, leading a tiny, delicate, serious, little lady, pale, with fair straight hair and steady eyes. She may be a little over thirty; she is dressed in a little barège dress with a pattern of faint green moss. She enters in mittens, in silence, in seriousness; our hearts are beating with wild excitement. This, then, is the authoress, the unknown power whose books have set all London talking, reading, speculating; some people even say our father wrote the books--the wonderful books. To say that we little girls had been given Jane Eyre to read scarcely represents the facts of the case; to say that we had taken it without leave, read bits here and read bits there, been carried away by an undreamt-of and hitherto unimagined whirlwind into things, times, places, all utterly absorbing, and at the same time absolutely unintelligible to us, would more accurately describe our state of mind on that summer's evening as we look at Jane Eyre--the great Jane Eyre--the tiny little lady. The moment is so breathless that dinner comes as a relief to the solemnity of the occasion, and we all smile as my father stoops to offer his arm; for, though genius she may be, Miss Bronte can barely reach his elbow. . . She sat gazing

at him with kindling eyes of interest, lighting up with a sort of illumination every now and then as she answered him. I can see her bending forward over the table, not eating, but listening to what he said as he carved the dish before him.

I think it must have been on this very occasion that my father invited some of his friends in the evening to meet Miss Bronte. . . . It was a gloomy and silent evening. Everyone waited for the brilliant conversation which never began at all. The room looked very dark, the lamp began to smoke a little, the conversation grew dimmer and more dim, the ladies sat round still expectant, my father was too much perturbed with the gloom and the silence to be able to cope with it at all.

Of course everyone had expected the writer of the unconventional, passionate Jane Eyre to talk brilliantly, no doubt to give voice to some truly astounding ideas. Their surprise at the quiet reserve of Charlotte so affected them that they were left dumb of all except the banalities of conversation. Thus since neither the literary "lion" nor the expectant Londoners did their share in tiding over what might only have been a temporary silence, the evening was a failure.¹

It was during this same visit that Charlotte met James Taylor, of Smith, Elder, and Company, whom she described as having "a determined dreadful nose in the middle of his face, which when poked into my countenance cuts into my soul like iron. Still he is horribly intelligent, quick, searching, sagacious, and with a memory of relentless tenacity. To turn to Williams after him or to Smith himself, is to turn from granite to easy down or warm fur."² Taylor is important in an account of Charlotte Bronte's life because

¹Ibid., p. 300.

²Ibid., p. 301.

at the time when Villette was almost half finished, he offered her a proposal of marriage. She often wondered whether she had done the right thing in refusing him. She would have loved him if she could, for his proposal came at a time when Charlotte needed new ties of affection and service to replace the lost ones. Taylor, sent to India to establish a branch of the publishing house, continued to correspond for a time; then he ceased to write.¹ "You ask about India," Charlotte answered Ellen. "All is silent as the grave." And two months later she wrote, "The evils that now and then wring a groan from my heart lie in position--not that I am a single woman and likely to remain a single woman--but because I am a lonely woman and likely to be lonely. But it cannot be helped and therefore imperatively must be borne--and borne too with as few words about it as may be."²

In the course of these visits, Charlotte met her old hero, the Duke of Wellington. She gained no satisfaction from their literary discussion, but left his presence still with a feeling of respect and awe. She also became acquainted with Harriet Martineau and formed a friendship which was not destined to last.

¹Ibid., p. 318.

²Hinkley, Charlotte and Emily, p. 220.

Three months after Anne's death Mr. Williams suggested that Charlotte write a sketch of her sisters for a new edition of their works. She could not do so then; her bereavement was too fresh. A year later she wrote the "Preface" to Wuthering Heights and the "Introduction" and "Notes" to the poems she selected from her sisters' verse. These she wrote at great emotional cost.

Charlotte, being pressed by her publishers for a successor to Shirley, sought to appease them by again offering The Professor. Once more they said, "No." Finally, in November, 1851, she began Villette. Her writing was often interrupted by her ill health and that of her father. She often despaired about her progress. To Harriet Martineau she wrote, "I think I would rather hire myself out again as a governess than write against the grain or out of the mood."¹ On November 20, 1851, she wrote to George Smith, who was reading her work as she finished it, "I have been able to work a little lately. . . . If I could always work, time would not be so long or hours sad to me; but blank and heavy intervals still occur, when power and will are at variance."² To Ellen, in September, 1852, she wrote: "But oh Nell! I don't get on. I feel fettered--incapable--sometimes very

¹Ibid., p. 297.

²Ibid.

low."¹ Written while Charlotte was suffering from bad health, the book suffered. With immense strength of will, Charlotte performed her task; but the tide of inspiration had ebbed, and she wrote with effort.

Nevertheless, Villette, published on January 28, 1853, was received with loud acclamations of praise. George Eliot wrote enthusiastically to Mrs. Bray, "I am only just returned to a sense of the real world about me, for I have been reading Villette, a still more wonderful book than Jane Eyre. There is something almost preternatural in its power."² Bryan W. Procter, in a letter to James T. Fields which appeared in the February issue of Harper's Magazine under the title of "Barry Cornwall and Some of his Friends," wrote:

The most striking book which has been recently published here is Villette, by the authoress of Jane Eyre, who, as you know, is a Miss Bronte. The book does not give one the most pleasing notion of the authoress, perhaps, but it is very clever, graphic, vigorous. It is "man's meat," and not the whipped syllabub, which is all froth, without any jam at the bottom.³

George William Curtis, in an article in Putnam's, wrote: "Villette takes rank at once with Jane Eyre, displaying the

¹White, p. 320.

²Blackwell, IV, 37.

³Moulton, VI, 28.

same vigour--the same exuberant power--the same bold outline--the same dramatic conception--and the same invincible mastery and fusion of elements usually considered repugnant to romance."¹

Favorable reviews appeared in the Leed's Mercury, the Examiner, the Literary Gazette, and the Nonconformist; unfavorable notices appeared in the Eclectic Review and the Guardian. To these criticisms Charlotte responded in a letter to George Smith on February 16, 1853:

I should like much to hear what you think of the general tone of the notices, whether you regard them as reasonably satisfactory. My father seems pleased with them, and so am I, as an evidence that the book is pretty well received. I must not tell you what I think of such reviews as that in the Athenaeum, lest you should pronounce me fastidious and exacting. On the whole the critique I like best yet is one I got at an early stage of the work, before it had undergone the "Old Bailey," being the observations of a respected amateur critic, one A. Fraser Esq. I am bound to admit, however, that this gentleman confined his approving remarks to the two first volumes, tacitly condemning the third by the severity of a prolonged silence.²

To W. S. Williams on March 9, 1853, she wrote:

I thank you for the Eclectic Review and the Guardian which I have duly received and read. And now I can only say--surely few authors would be so weak as to be shaken by reviews like these!

My dear Sir--were a review to appear inspired with treble their animus--pray do not withhold it from me. I like to see the satisfactory notices--

¹George William Curtis, "Villette and Ruth," Putnam's Monthly Magazine, I (May, 1853), 535.

²Blackwell, IV, 46.

especially I like to carry them to my Father--but I must see such as are unsatisfactory and hostile--these are for my own especial edification--it is in these I best read public feeling and opinion. To shun examination into the dangerous and disagreeable seems to me cowardly--I long always to know what really is, and am only unnerved when kept in the dark.

And now I smile at my friends with their little notes of condolence, with their hints about "unmanly insult." Surely the poor Guardian Critic has a right to lisp his opinion that Currer Bell's female characters do not realize his notion of ladyhood--and even "respectfully to decline" the honour of an acquaintance with "Jane Eyre" and "Lucy Snowe" without meriting on that account to be charged with having offered an "unmanly insult."

Oh! I forgive the worthy critic very freely--his acquaintance and his standard of refinement are two points that will not trouble me much: perhaps ere to-morrow I shall even have forgiven my "Kyind friends" their false alarm.¹

The one notice which Charlotte could not forgive was that of Harriet Martineau which appeared in the Daily News. Since Mrs. Gaskell is the authority which most critics quote, I shall use her account, from The Life of Charlotte Bronte, of the situation which arose between the two friends.² Mrs. Gaskell believed that Charlotte's slight disappointment regarding the reception of Villette arose from her great susceptibility to an opinion she valued much, that of Miss Martineau, who, both in an article on Villette in the Daily News, and in a private letter to Miss Bronte, wounded her to

¹Ibid., p. 51.

²Based on pp. 408-411.

the quick by expressions of censure which she believed to be unjust and unfounded, but which, if correct and true, went deeper than any merely artistic fault. An author may bring himself to believe that he can bear blame with equanimity, from whatever quarter it comes; but its force is derived altogether from the character of the critic. To the public, one reviewer may be the same impersonal being as another; but an author frequently attaches a far deeper significance to opinions. They are the verdicts of those whom he respects and admires, or the mere words of those for whose judgment he cares not a jot. It is this knowledge of the individual worth of the reviewer's opinion which makes the censures of some sink so deep and prey so heavily upon an author's heart. And thus, in proportion to her true, firm regard for Miss Martineau, did Charlotte suffer under what she considered her friend's misjudgment not merely of writing, but of character.¹

She had long before asked Miss Martineau to tell her whether she considered that any want of womanly delicacy or propriety was betrayed in Jane Eyre. And on receiving Miss Martineau's assurance that she did not, Charlotte had entreated her to declare it frankly if she thought there was any failure of this kind in any future work of "Currer Bell's." The requested promise of faithful truth-speaking having been given, Miss Martineau fulfilled it when Villette appeared.

¹Ibid., p. 408.

Miss Bronte writhed, however, under what she felt to be injustice. Mrs. Gaskell believed that it was only fair to present Miss Martineau's account of the misunderstanding. On Charlotte's first interview with Miss Martineau in December, 1849, Charlotte had expressed pleasure at being able to consult a friend about certain strictures of the reviewers. There were some criticisms which she did not understand and from which she wished to profit. Miss Martineau wrote to Mrs. Gaskell the following account of the situation:

She [Charlotte] said that the reviews sometimes puzzled her, and that some imputed to her what made her think she must be very unlike other people, or cause herself to be misunderstood. She could not make it all out at all, and wished that I could explain it. I had not seen that sort of criticism then, but I had heard Jane Eyre called 'coarse.' I told her that love was treated with unusual breadth, and that the kind of intercourse was uncommon, and uncommonly described, but that I did not consider the book a coarse one, though I could not answer for it that there were no traits which, on a second leisurely reading, I might not dislike on that ground. She begged me to give it that second reading, and I did on condition that she would regard my criticisms as made through the eyes of her reviewers.¹

Miss Martineau sent Mrs. Gaskell Charlotte's letter written when Villette was on the point of publication:

January 21, 1853

I know that you will give me your thoughts upon my book, as frankly as if you spoke to some near relative whose good you preferred to her gratification. I wince under the pain of condemnation,--like

¹Ibid., p. 409.

any other weak structure of flesh and blood; but I love, I honour, I kneel to truth. Let her smite me on the one cheek,--good! the tears may spring to the eyes; but courage! there is the other side, hit again, right sharply.¹

"This," as Miss Martineau observed, "was the genuine spirit of the woman."²

Miss Martineau, in reply to this request, had written a letter, part of which ran as follows:

As for the other side of the question which you so desire to know, I have but one thing to say; but it is not a small one. I do not like the love, either the kind or the degree of it; and its prevalence in the book, and effect on the action of it, help explain the passages in the reviews which you consulted me about, and seem to afford some foundation for the criticisms they offered.³

Miss Martineau also allowed Mrs. Gaskell to make use of the passage referring to the same fault, real or supposed, in her review of Villette in the Daily News:

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. It begins with the child of six years old, at the opening--a charming picture--and it closes with it at the last page; and so dominant is this idea--so incessant is the writer's tendency to describe the need of being loved--that the heroine, who tells her own story, leaves the reader at last under the uncomfortable impression of her having 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: there is an absence of introspection, an unconsciousness, a

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 410.

repose in women's lives--unless under peculiarly unfortunate circumstances--of which we find no admission in this book; and to the absence of it may be attributed some of the criticism which the book will meet with from readers who are no prudes, but whose reason and taste will reject the assumption that events and characters are to be regarded through the medium of one passion only. And here ends all demur, etc.¹

This seems a fitting place to state how utterly unconscious Charlotte was of what some people considered coarse in her writings. One day, during a visit at the Briery when she had just met Mrs. Gaskell, the conversation turned upon the subject of women's writing fiction; and some one remarked on the fact that, in certain instances, authoresses had overstepped the line which men felt to be proper in works of this kind. Miss Bronte said she wondered how far this was a natural consequence of allowing the imagination to work too constantly; Sir James and Lady Kay Shuttleworth expressed their belief that such violations of propriety were altogether unconscious on the part of those to whom reference had been made. Charlotte very earnestly commented, "I trust God will take from me whatever power of invention or expression I may have, before He lets me become blind to the sense of what is fitting or unfitting to be said!"²

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., p. 411.

Again she was invariably shocked and distressed when she heard of any disapproval of Jane Eyre on the ground mentioned above. Some one said to her in London, "You know, you and I, Miss Bronte, have both written naughty books!" She dwelt much on this remark; and, as if it weighed on her mind, took an opportunity to ask Mrs. Smith, as she would have asked a mother, whether, indeed, there was anything "so wrong" in Jane Eyre.¹

Villette, like Jane Eyre, grew out of the experience of Charlotte Bronte as a boarding school pupil, governess, and pupil-teacher. Villette is based chiefly on her two years in Brussels, 1842-1844. However, it, too, like Shirley, comes off second best in comparison with Jane Eyre, and for the same reason, lack of spontaneity. Laboring under an emotional strain and trying not to offend, Charlotte again fell short of the mark which Jane Eyre had set. To Ellen Nussey she wrote, "The book I think will not be considered pretentious, nor is it of a character to excite hostility." And after Ellen had read it, Charlotte wrote her, "As to the character of Lucy Snowe, my intention from the first was that she should not occupy the pedestal to which Jane Eyre was raised by some injudicious admirers. She is where I meant her to be and where no charge of self-laudation can touch her."² "Unless I am mistaken," Charlotte

¹Ibid.

²Hinkley, Charlotte and Emily, p. 298.

wrote, "the emotion in the book will be found to be kept throughout in tolerable subjection."¹ This is done in the sense that the book is a study in "repressed emotion."²

A final evidence of her fame in her day is the biography written by a friend and contemporary novelist. After Charlotte Bronte's death on March 31, 1855, there were, of course, all sorts of tales running rampant concerning the woman who had become so famous within the last few years of her life--tales about her and the strange life of her sisters. Mr. Bronte became convinced that a biography of his daughter's life would be fitting. The Reverend Arthur Bell Nicholls, whom Charlotte had married on June 29, 1854, was violently opposed to this idea. Mr. Bronte's enthusiasm was born of his immense pride in the fact that his daughter had become distinguished in the eyes of the world. Mr. Nicholl's objection arose primarily from his sense of invasion of his privacy. However, through the intervention of Ellen Nussey, Mr. Nicholls consented to Elizabeth Gaskell's undertaking the task of writing a biography of his wife. The choice of Mrs. Gaskell was a wise one, for who could better defend Charlotte Bronte as a woman than could Mrs. Gaskell?

Mrs. Gaskell did her utmost to write a true account of the life of Charlotte Bronte, one of her closest friends.

¹Ibid., p. 314.

²Ibid.

She gleaned information from all quarters. She actually visited every place that Charlotte had lived, excepting the places where she had held the positions of governess. In her efforts at truth, however, Mrs. Gaskell made one bad mistake. This was her interpretation of Branwell's relations with the woman whom Mrs. Gaskell stigmatized as having led him altogether astray. "The wretched woman not only survives, but passes about in the gay circles of London Society as a vivacious, well-dressed, flourishing widow." By revealing the misery and the early death of her partner in guilt, Mrs. Gaskell trusted that there might be awakened in the widow some feelings of repentance.¹ Although the lady's name was not mentioned, she was easily recognized, and the matter was taken up by a firm of solicitors who acted on her behalf. As a result, in May, 1857, two months after the book was published under the title of The Life of Charlotte Bronte, every statement in the book imputing to a "widowed lady referred to, but not named therein, any breach of her conjugal, or her material, or of her social duties" was retracted, particularly the imputation of guilty intercourse between the lady and Branwell.² The objectionable matter was deleted from subsequent editions, but not

¹Elizabeth Haldane, Mrs. Gaskell and Her Friends (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1931), p. 169.

²Ibid.

until the two early editions had nearly run their course. The delay was due in part to the fact that Mrs. Gaskell, with her two elder daughters and her friend Catherine Winkworth, had gone to Rome. On their return they learned of the success of the book from a publishing point of view and of the storm of criticism which was brewing. Statements which had been accepted as truths by Mrs. Gaskell had been mere fabrications or misinterpretations.

Mr. Bronte is reported to have laughed over the statements made about himself. Mr. Nicholls was not so easily satisfied, because in the book he did not appear as the most sympathetic of husbands; indeed, one is reminded of pearls being cast before swine. The husband of a Charlotte Bronte should have regarded himself, the biography implied, as responsible to the world for making conditions of his partner's daily life favorable to the development of her genius, not using her up in the drudgery of parish life as he apparently did.¹ Charlotte had written to Ellen Nussey in September, 1854:

I really seem to have had scarcely a spare moment since that dim quiet June morning, when you, Ellen, and myself all walked down to Haworth Church. Not that I have been wearied or oppressed; but the fact is, my time is not my own now; somebody else wants a good portion of it, and says, "We must do so and so." We do so and so, accordingly; and it generally seems the right thing.²

¹Kathleen Tillotson, Novels of the Eighteen-Forties (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 109.

²Gaskell, p. 435.

This was not, however, an expression of discontent, for Charlotte Bronte was actually blissfully happy with her husband.¹

The servants were furious at having been called wasteful. Mr. Bronte wrote a certificate of character declaring that they were not wasteful, but kind and honest. The villagers objected to the descriptions given of them and to a reference to a girl who had been seduced, but no lawsuits resulted.

The second major objection was made on behalf of the Reverend W. Carus-Wilson, who was well-known and highly respected in evangelical circles. He had conducted the school at Cowan Bridge which was attended by the Bronte sisters. On this point, however, Mrs. Gaskell remained firm. Numerous letters were exchanged, tracts written, and lawsuits threatened, but Mrs. Gaskell did not change her account.

The publication of Mrs. Gaskell's biography of Charlotte Bronte came as a revelation upon the world. Readers everywhere had learned to admire the writings of Currer Bell and to mourn over her premature death, but few of them had imagined that the life and personal character of the author of Jane Eyre had been what they were. On the whole, the

¹Lucy P. Stebbins, A Victorian Album (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), p. 89.

biography written by Mrs. Gaskell is the best we have to date on Charlotte Bronte. Her errors are honest mistakes. Her picture of Charlotte's life is a poignantly touching one of a woman who achieved fame in spite of a life which was a "walking nightmare of poverty and self-suppression."¹

Charles Kingsley, in a letter to Mrs. Gaskell in 1857, congratulated her on her work:

Let me renew our long-interrupted acquaintance by complimenting you on poor Miss Bronte's "Life." You have had a delicate and a great work to do, and you have done it admirable [sic]. Be sure that the book will do good. It will shame literary people into some stronger belief that a simple, virtuous, practical home life, is consistent with high imaginative genius; and it will shame, too, the prudery of a not over cleanly though carefully whitewashed age, into believing that purity is now (as in all ages till now) quite compatible with the knowledge of evil. I confess that the book has made me ashamed of myself. "Jane Eyre" I hardly looked into, very seldom reading a work of fiction--yours, indeed, and Thackeray's, are the only ones I care to open. "Shirley" disgusted me at the opening, and I gave up the writer and her books with a notion that she was a person who liked coarseness. How I misjudged her! and how thankful I am that I never put a word of my misconceptions into print, or recorded my misjudgments of one who is a whole heaven above me.²

¹Haldane, p. 179.

²Reid, p. 190.

CHAPTER II

THE WOMAN NOVELIST

In order to understand the biased attitude of certain critics toward Charlotte Bronte's novels after the disclosure of the identity of Currer Bell, it will be helpful to trace the status of the woman novelists and their contribution to this new type of fiction before the publication of Charlotte's novels.

The novel as a type of fiction did not arrive until the publication of Samuel Richardson's Pamela in 1740. It was not part of the conventional Classical School of eighteenth-century literature, which appealed to reason and used as models the ancient classics. The so-called Augustans wrote for the intellectuals and patrons of literature. However, with the increase in wealth and educational opportunities of the middle class, a new and important audience of readers was rapidly developing--a class of people strongly realistic and moral, who preferred prose to poetry, who in their desire for refinement frowned on coarseness and impropriety, and who favored sentiment and feeling. It was to this class that the early novels appealed. It was not until Walter Scott's day that the novel was recognized as a type of literary art like poetry and drama; the eighteenth-

century and early nineteenth-century woman writer of novels was, like the men, merely a "popular" writer. Because women composed the majority of fiction readers the stories were largely of a domestic nature, full of sentiment and sensibility.

The Novel of Sensibility

Unfortunately in many cases sensibility, which originally meant sensitiveness to emotional influences, resulted in the substitution of emotion for thought. Action in response to emotion on the part of the characters constituted the plot, which was framed so as to involve the characters in the greatest possible number of tribulations. Suffering, rather than joy, predominated. The pages of these novels were filled with dying parents, families starving in garrets, and seduced girls; the characters screamed, sobbed, tore their hair, and beat their breasts. Tears seemed to be the only safety valve, and they flowed most freely.

The fiction of sensibility, though supposed to be realistic, had little relation to reality. In an attempt to picture the inner man, the novelists enlarged and exaggerated every emotion; the result was melodrama. It was an hysterical and morbid school of fiction. A large part of the blame has been placed on the shoulders of the woman writer. The type died, according to B. G. MacCarthy, "of exhaustion accelerated by continuous cardiac haemorrhage."¹

¹The Female Pen (Oxford: Cork University Press, 1947), II, 39.

A further encouragement to the woman writer was another standard of criticism applied to the novel of sensibility: didacticism. This was indispensable. If the novel was made a vehicle of learning, administered as a sugar-coated pill so that the lady readers found it palatable, then the British critic was inclined to be indulgent to the woman writer.

But regardless of her ability to portray emotion or to teach, the woman author always had to remain humble and self-deprecating. Reviewers were ever on the alert for the slightest sign of female self-importance. The lady writer must always remain anonymous; any allusion to her role as an author or to her book, uttered in her presence, was considered by most women an insult. The critics "forgave" the woman writer's faults because of her sex. This attitude encouraged mediocrity and crushed real literary worth.¹ Thus few of the surprising number of women novelists are mentioned by name in general histories of English literature. Their value lay in the growing recognition of the ability of the "female pen" to write about life as experienced by women themselves. With their increasing hold over the reading public, enlarged by the spread of the circulating libraries, the woman novelist dared to ignore masculine dictates regarding literary procedures. She was free to write as a

¹Ibid., p. 41.

woman. It was not, however, until the nineteenth century that women found their unique media and were able to develop the art of the novel along lines of their own.¹

Although women writers were looked down upon professionally, there was an increase in the prestige of women in general. "Previous to this time," commented Dr. Johnson, "in the female world, any acquaintance with books was distinguished only to be censured. Those were the days 'when a woman who could spell a common letter was regarded as all-accomplished.' Now they vie with men in everything."² By the time Fanny Burney published Evelina in 1778, women had their own literary salons. Miss Burney is the first woman writer discussed in this thesis because of her influence upon the attitude toward women writers and her contribution toward developing the art of fiction.

The Novel of Manners

Fanny Burney (1752-1840)

It was Fanny Burney who raised the status of the woman writer to one of respectability. She was the first "lady" novelist. She proved that it was possible to be a novelist and a lady at the same time. She thus removed the

¹Ibid., p. 43.

²Ibid., p. 86.

professional stigma from the woman novelist.¹ She also did a great service to the novel itself by directing it away from its excessive sentimentality. She made a story out of the trivialities of everyday experience in her "romances of the teatable." She discovered the novel of manners, the type in which the woman writer excels.² Although she immortalized the popular trait of sensibility in her well-bred, elegant, and fastidious heroines, she portrayed realistically many other types of characters and is a forerunner of Dickens in her eccentrics. In Evelina she achieved unity and a sense of reality in her picture of fashionable London life by her angle of narration: the reader sees the London world not as it was but as it appeared to a seventeen-year-old girl. Although Fanny Burney wrote with a feminine audience in mind, men sat up all night to read her books.³

In the last half of the eighteenth century a group of poets began to show an interest in external nature and the past in contrast to the traditional subjects of the Classical School. This interest of the "Romantic Pioneers" was reflected in a new type of fiction, the Gothic Romance

¹Edward Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the English Novel (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1943), p.134.

²Ibid., p. 135.

³Ibid.

(Gothic in this sense meant the Middle Ages), which was a complete departure from the novel of contemporary life and manners. The setting for the events was usually a Gothic medieval castle. The novelists returned to bygone ages, distant lands, and wild scenery. The plots and characters were highly imaginative and romantic. This escape from over-used domestic themes offered opportunity for unlimited freedom of invention. The word "unlimited" should be underscored, for the novelists of the Gothic School produced novels of unequalled horror. There was the same heroine of the Novel of Sensibility, but here she was caught up in and subjected to every variety of suspense, terror, and peril. The most popular writer of this type of fiction was a woman.

Mrs. Ann Radcliffe (1764-1832)

Although Mrs. Radcliffe, Queen of Terror in the 1790's, employed minuteness of detail in her descriptions, she frankly entitled all her works "Romances." In them one finds all the typical Gothic techniques and machinery: the castle with its secret passages and vaults, the persecuted heroine, the forced marriage, the false clues to strange phenomena, the villain who dies at the end of the story, a plot full of mystery, suspense, and coincidence. In her suspenseful plots, villain heroes, and use of scenery to inspire and intensify the moods of her characters

Mrs. Radcliffe was a forerunner of Charlotte Bronte. Mrs. Radcliffe illustrates the ability of women to compete with men in fiction and to top them in a popular type. From the point of view of literary value, however, according to one critic:

The reception of her romances by the public indicated a great and increasing degradation of the public taste, which, instead of banqueting as heretofore upon scenes of passion, like those of Richardson, or of life and manners, as in the pages of Smollett and Fielding, was now coming back to the fare of the nursery, and gorged upon the wild and improbable fictions of an over-heated imagination.¹

Another phase of the Romantic Movement in literature (1798-1832), which triumphed over Classicism at the end of the eighteenth century, was the interest in the individual instead of society. Philosophers, influenced especially by Rousseau, were proclaiming the demoralizing influence of society on man: man should be freed from man-made institutions in order to develop his soul. People of fashion began to look beyond the drawing room and the coffee-house and to realize that they were perhaps something more than exquisitely fashioned social automata. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, writers were concentrating on enriching the inner life of the individual.² The human spirit was reaching

¹Marjory A. Bald, Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge: University Press, 1923), p. 55.

²Lewis E. Gates, Studies and Appreciations (New York: Macmillan Company, 1900), p. 18.

out for new forms of experience. It was emancipating itself from the restrictions of the eighteenth century. "The heart, the senses, and the imagination," says Gates, "reasserted their rights after the long tyranny of the understanding. The whole nature of man was once more vitalized into free, confident play after the long period of paralyzing over-intellectualism which had so curiously prevailed since the days of Descartes and Hobbes."¹

To become a free soul, man must live with Nature and according to Nature. This theory of the romantic poets and current philosophy found expression in several types of didactic novels which pointed out the evils of society and proposed reforms. Many women novelists used their pens in this battle for reforms and new ways of life.

The Tendenz or Didactic Novel

The tendenz novel, unlike the sensibility novel, which was concerned with trumped-up causes of emotion, dealt with the real aspects of human suffering. It came into closer contact with the facts of life. There were many reforms needed in England at this time; therefore many torches were available for a crusader to carry. Tendenz fiction cried out against the prison system, the criminal code, the educational system, the conditions of the working

¹Ibid., p. 25.

class, the neglect of the insane, political oppression, and all the other bondage of civilization. A favorite topic of women novelists was the injustice shown to their sex; they argued that the subjection of women was no less flagrant than any other aspect of traditional injustice.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)

Mary Wollstonecraft was among the first to throw down the gauntlet for her sex. She believed that education was the best way to raise the status of woman. Her book The Vindication of the Rights of Woman, published in 1792, advised women to revolt "not merely against men's authority, but against feminine propriety." She wished them to abandon the "pernicious cult of sensibility, the deluge of false sentiments and overstretched feelings, the narrow opportunism of their upbringing."¹ Her novels are not novels in the true sense of the word, but powerful outpourings against social injustices; and they are remembered as such--Mary, A Fiction (1788) and The Wrongs of Women (1798).

By 1824 this excessive individualism had nearly spent its creative force. The Romanticists had spun a web in which they had become entangled. They had portrayed a strange and treacherous world, quite out of the realm of knowledge of ordinary people. They had shunned the routine

¹MacCarthy, p. 190.

and restrictions of ordinary life and had let impulse and instinct have free rein. Since under this regime each person went his separate way, Romanticism tended to shatter conventional society, to replace its compact organization of harmonious types with a loosely related mass of abnormal personalities.¹ Again, the novel reflected the change in point of view by returning to the presentation of conventional life.

Return of the Realistic Novel
of Conventional Life

The novelists of this later period of realism did not repudiate Romance; they strove to consolidate it with everyday life and to recreate common life in terms of beauty. Because they felt, however, the claims of the commonplace and the conventional, they strove to secure a synthesis of the ideal and the actual. The woman writer who best illustrates these aims is Maria Edgeworth, the most prominent novelist between Fanny Burney and Jane Austen.

Maria Edgeworth (1767-1849)

Maria Edgeworth reflected all the intellectual movements of her generation and exerted an important influence on later novelists by her contributions to the technique of

¹Gates, p. 29.

the novel. She widened Fanny Burney's "form for women" to the discussion of social and political problems. She was the first woman to make fiction not only a picture of life, but of its meaning. She wrote satires on society; she defended female education. She created the family-history chronicle and the national novel; she forever banished the comic "stage" Patrick and introduced genuine Celtic types of characters. She started the use of "local color" and innovated the detached angle of narration of a minor character.¹ Thus though not a great writer herself, she contributed greatly to the stature of the woman novelist and to the development of the novel. She is best remembered for her novels depicting the struggle of Ireland for freedom from the English yoke of oppression.

Of course, the greatest exemplar of the realistic novelist before the Victorian Period is Jane Austen.

Jane Austen (1775-1817)

Jane Austen's novels may be considered the final expression of domesticity in fiction. Woman was the center of her world; she was concerned with men only as the chief element in the life of woman. She has given us an insight into the peculiarities of female character and exposed the female mind. She denied her heroes and heroines any charm

¹Wagenknecht, p. 138.

which might be derived from romantic idealism. She conceived a heroine without sensibility, but with common sense and humor. This heroine did not marry merely for convenience; she held decency more important than happiness; she knew that though marriages are made in heaven, they must be lived on earth.¹ Jane Austen's writing is characterized by an aloofness, an attitude of amused detachment. She sits back and laughs over the corpse of the novel of sensibility.² Unlike the writers of Gothic romance, she confined herself strictly within the limits of her own experience, thus eliminating character-types, mystery, excitement of adventure, and melodramatic emotion. Like Charlotte Bronte she had a narrow experience, but she adopted an entirely different attitude towards it. In Charlotte's work there clings a great wistfulness; it is incomplete, tentative, always striving for something vaguely out of reach; she had a limited external experience; yet within her own spirit there lay a mysterious power. Jane Austen, looking out from herself, scrutinized her small experience and concentrated upon the deeds and sentiments of other people.³

She cannot be regarded as a herald of the coming Victorian age. She was the kind of person who seldom glanced

¹Ibid., p. 149.

²Johnson, p. 69.

³Bald, p. 25.

to the past or to the future. Hers was chiefly the outlook of the present. When she looked back, it was mainly to the tradition of Fanny Burney. Unlike the women who came after her, Jane Austen had nothing of the pioneering instinct. She neither wished for nor feared to startle the world with revolutionary achievements. In her writing we find no trace of hunger for liberty or yearning for wider horizons such as we find in Charlotte Bronte's writings.

Jane Austen takes her place in an age of transition. While she helped to keep alive the former excellences, she did nothing to retard the processes of new birth. In the midst of a period restless, curious, and impassioned, she preserved her faith in moderation and discipline. Quiet writing such as hers had a steadying effect upon a hot-headed and hot-blooded generation. Without obtrusive effort or exertion of visible influence, she gave to her world what it most required--an example of reserved and ordered serenity; she gave us "the lady."¹ More important still, she gave us the literary artist. She is a true classicist. Her unified plots, her dramatic scenes and dialogue, her characters, her point of view, her incomparable picture of manners, her fundamental understanding of life, and her style have won for her a rank equal to that of the great men novelists. In her own age, her realistic novels, along with

¹Ibid., p. 27.

the romantic novels of Sir Walter Scott, had finally placed the novel in the realm of "literature" for their contemporaries. Upper-class readers were no longer ashamed to admit their enjoyment in reading it.

Thus during the century of novel writing before the Victorian Period the predecessors of Charlotte Bronte had in great numbers invaded, usually for financial reasons, this lucrative profession. Women novelists had shown that they could compete with men in popularity in the main types of novels that had developed--the novel of sensibility, the romance, the realistic novel, and the didactic novel. They had also contributed some important elements to the development of the art of the novel--in structure, point of view, and technique. They had overcome the handicap of being labeled "unladylike," but they had not yet won fair literary judgment for their novels. There was still a double standard of criticism.

Unfortunately this attitude continued in the Victorian Age and accounts for the frequent use of pseudonyms by women novelists.

The Victorian Novel

During the Victorian period the tradition that a woman writer was by the very nature of things something abnormal and altogether unnecessary prevailed. A woman was

believed to be inferior to a man by nature. She had not the native intelligence equal to that of a man. Although educated, she could not hope to reach the high plane occupied by her male counterpart. In an article in the Edinburgh Review (1841) entitled "Rights and Condition of Women," this opinion was very aptly stated:

If, then, nature had bestowed intellectual gifts in equal abundance on the two sexes, we might reasonably expect that the number of women of remarkable genius--of women who have attained the highest eminence in literature and art--would have been as considerable as that of men. But how stands the case? We will not apply a severe, and what some might call an unfair test, and ask for the female counterparts in genius to those great leaders of their race who have been mightiest in the arts of war and government; because the exercise of such arts is not congenial with female habits. We will look for excellence of the highest kind in the calm pursuits of literature and taste--pursuits which are as well adapted to the habits of women as of men, and for which nothing in the education of men peculiarly tends to enable them to excel. We will even set aside science, lest it should be considered too severe, and take for our basis of comparison poetry and the fine arts; in which the sensitive and imaginative temperaments, and refined and tasteful habits of women, might be presumed to give them an unquestionable superiority over the more stubborn nerve and coarser habits of man. Yet, though educated women are very conversant with elegant literature, perhaps even more than the majority of men, and many have from all time been versifiers--and though the poet is proverbially 'born, not made;' and though there is nothing in the habits of women which, so much as in the severer occupations of men, should tend to quench the poetical fire, or induce them to resist its inspiration, yet where is the poetess whom even partiality could place in that elevated class to which belong our Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, Dryden, Byron?¹

¹LXXIII (April-July, 1841), 193.

Women were no longer encouraged, but were advised to confine their activities to the home. And if a woman wrote at all, she was expected to produce, not a great piece of art, but a simple, unprovoking piece of literature which merely restated the social niceties, caused no misgivings, and emphasized the role of woman as one of obedience and servitude to God and to her family. Lewes, in his article in the Edinburgh Review (1850) maintained:

The grand function of woman, it must always be recollected, is, and ever must be, Maternity: and this we regard not only as her distinctive characteristic, and most endearing charm, but as a high and holy office--the prolific source, not only of the best affections and virtues of which our nature is capable, but also of the wisest thoughtfulness, and most useful habits of observation, by which that nature can be elevated and adorned. . . . All women are intended by Nature to be mothers; and by far the greater number--not less, we suppose, than nine tenths--are called upon to act in that sacred character; and, consequently, for twenty of the best years of their lives--those very years in which men either rear the grand fabric or lay the solid foundations of their fame and fortune--women are mainly occupied by the cares, the duties, the enjoyments and the sufferings of maternity. . . . High art and science always require the whole man; and never yield their great prizes but to the devotion of a life. But the life of a woman, from her cradle upwards, is otherwise devoted: and those whose lot it is to expend their best energies, from the age of twenty to forty, in the cares and duties of maternity, have but slender chances of carrying off those great prizes. It is the same with the high functions of statesmanship, legislation, generalship, judgeship, and other elevated stations and pursuits, to which some women, we believe, have recently asserted the equal pretensions of their sex. Their still higher and indispensable functions of maternity afford the answer to all such claims. What should we do with a leader of opposition in the seventh month of her

pregnancy? or a general in chief who at the opening of a campaign was 'doing as well as could be expected'? or a chief justice with twins?

If it be said that these considerations only apply to wives and mothers, and ought not to carry along with them any disqualification of virgins or childless widows, the answer is, that as Nature qualifies and apparently designs all women to be mothers, it is impossible to know who are to escape that destiny, till it is too late to begin the training necessary for artists, scholars, or politicians.¹

In spite of these vehement masculine warnings, women continued to write novels, especially when they felt they had a message or an interpretation of life to communicate. Among the novelists with a message, the intellectual Harriet Martineau is outstanding.

Harriet Martineau (1802-1876)

Unlike Jane Austen, who wrote with her tongue in her cheek, Harriet Martineau wrote with passionate sincerity. Believing herself to be the servant of humanity, she sought to save souls by the diffusion of knowledge, especially in regard to politics, religion, and society. Inevitably her works were didactic. She dealt with the fashionable subject of political economy in Illustrations of Political Economy (1832-1834), which made her a person of importance to her contemporaries.² Her novels, such as Deerbrook (1839), were

¹P. 156.

²Stebbins, p. 17.

remarkable because they were moralizing without seeming to be so.¹ She believed that women would obtain equal rights with men when they had been educated to deserve them.² Her value lay in her frankness in expressing her opinions on matters of current interest. We shall see later the effect this frankness had on her friendship with Charlotte Bronte.

Charlotte Bronte (1816-1855)

Having reviewed the position of the woman novelist and the attitude of the critics towards her, let us examine the criticism of Charlotte Bronte's novels to discover how much it was influenced by this attitude and whether Charlotte's repeated protests in any way helped to change it.

It was because of this current attitude toward women writers--criticizing them for weaknesses which the critics claimed to be inherent in women instead of criticizing them solely on the merits of their work--that Charlotte Bronte and her sisters assumed men's names. Charlotte became Currer Bell; Emily became Ellis Bell; Anne became Acton Bell. These are not definitely masculine names, and in their methods of writing the Bronte sisters made no attempt to disguise their sex.

¹Johnson, p. 149.

²Stebbins, p. 20.

In 1846, however, at the time of the publication of Jane Eyre, the identity of Currer Bell was a question of considerable debate among critics. The opinion was expressed that the Bells were three brothers of the weaving profession in some Lancashire town. Because of the dedication of the second edition of Jane Eyre to Thackeray, speculation arose as to whether or not Currer Bell was his mistress and was repaying the honor of his having modeled the character of Becky Sharp on her by modeling the character of Edward Rochester on him.

In the famous Quarterly Review article under the title "Vanity Fair, Jane Eyre, and Governesses," Elizabeth Rigby stated:

We are as much satisfied to accept the name of Currer Bell as any other. Whoever it be, it is a person who, with great mental powers, combines a total ignorance of the habits of society, a great coarseness of taste, and a heathenish doctrine of religion.

Although we cannot pronounce that the authorship of Jane Eyre appertains to a real Mr. Currer Bell and to no other, yet that it appertains to a man, and not, as many assert, to a woman, we are strongly inclined to affirm.¹

Elizabeth Rigby enforced her argument by pointing out that no woman would "truss game and garnish dessert dishes" with the same hands, nor would she even speak of doing so in the same breath.² She also mentioned the complete ignorance

¹LXXXIV (December, 1848), 175.

²Ibid.

of the author of Jane Eyre in respect to dressing appropriately:

Above all, no woman attires another in such fancy dresses as Jane's ladies assume. Miss Ingram coming down irresistible in morning robe of sky-blue crape, a gauze azure scarf twisted in her hair!! no lady, we understand, when suddenly roused in the night, would think of hurrying on 'a frock.' They have garments more convenient for such occasions, and more becoming, too.

If we ascribe the book to a woman at all, we have no alternative but to ascribe it to one who has, for some sufficient reason, long forfeited the society of her own sex.¹

The author of an article entitled "New Novels" contended:

Most writers seem to imagine that they can produce a genuine Yorkshireman by cutting off the final consonant of every word he utters. Currer Bell's Yorkshiremen are not such Cockneyfied automata. Their thoughts are as provincial as their speech. We would bet a trifle that the author is a Yorkshirewoman;--Yorkshire, we are sure; woman, we think. Why not Miss Currer Bell as well as Miss Shirley Keeldar? She knows women by their brains and hearts, men by their foreheads and chests. She (we cannot help begging the question) depicts women often quaint and odd, but never unnatural, while the men are not unfrequently ranting mountebanks, who, instead of the toleration and applause the author claims for them, would infallibly, in real life, be 'cut' or kicked, or shut up in a madhouse. The author, then, is a woman. Moreover she is, or has been a governess. She is always good on the topic.²

The whole reading world of England was impatient to know the identity of Currer Bell. Even the publishers of

¹Ibid., p. 176.

²Fraser's Magazine, XL (1849), 693.

Jane Eyre, Messrs. Smith and Elder, remained unenlightened on the subject. It was a result of their ignorance that Currer Bell's identity became known. Acton and Ellis Bell's publisher, Thomas C. Newby, had sold, unknown of course to Currer Bell's publishers, the right to print in America Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. He had assured the American publisher that to the best of his knowledge all three were written by the same author. When Messrs. Smith and Elder received in 1848 a bid from a publisher in America for the work of Currer Bell, the previous agreement made by Ellis and Acton Bell's publisher became known. Charlotte, accompanied by Anne, went immediately to London to explain.¹

Charlotte Bronte was not a "mixer"; she lacked the "herd-instinct"; she could not drift along among the crowd, saying, doing, and thinking the accepted thing because it was the accepted thing. Charlotte did not, in fact, know what the accepted thing was. She could seek sanction for a custom by asking: Is it right? Is it wise? Is it kind? But for her the question "Is it done?" remained unanswered. For this reason she was always silent, shy, and miserable in social circles, with no assurance and with small hope of hitting on the correct conduct. This shyness may be attributed to her sequestered life, her isolated childhood and

¹Gaskell, p. 245.

youth which was absorbed in imaginative pursuits. It is not, therefore, difficult to understand her actions and her reactions to the events experienced during this visit to her publishers.

After presenting herself in person to her publishers, she and Anne were immediately introduced into a whirl of social events--at least it constituted a "whirl" to two such innocents. They refused an invitation to meet a few of George Smith's literary friends at his home, although the temptation to accept was strong because among them were some writers whom Charlotte particularly wanted to meet. The sisters, hoping to preserve their anonymity outside of the circle of their publishers, returned to their lodgings at the Chapter Coffee-House, Paternoster Row. Charlotte was beset by a headache and a general feeling of illness. She prepared, however, to receive a call from some of the ladies of Smith's family. When the visitors arrived, Charlotte and Anne were surprised to see them in full evening dress. In spite of headache, weariness, and illness, Charlotte and Anne dressed themselves and set out for the opera.¹ Charlotte gave this account of the London visit and its effect on her:

Fine ladies and gentlemen glanced at us, as we stood by the box-door, which was not yet opened, with a slight, graceful superciliousness, quite

¹Ibid., p. 271.

warranted by the circumstances. Still I felt pleasurablely excited in spite of headache, sickness, and conscious clownishness; and I saw Anne was calm and gentle, which she always is. The performance was Rossini's "Barber of Seville,"--very brilliant, though I fancy there are things I should like better. We got home after one o'clock. We had never been in bed the night before; had been in constant excitement for twenty-four hours; you may imagine we were tired. The next day, Sunday, Mr. Williams came early to take us to church; and in the afternoon Mr. Smith and his mother fetched us in a carriage, and took us to his house to dine.

On Monday we went to the Exhibition of the Royal Academy, the National Gallery, dined again at Mr. Smith's, and then went home to tea with Mr. Williams at his house.

On Tuesday morning, we left London, laden with books Mr. Smith had given us, and got safely home. A more jaded wretch than I looked, it would be difficult to conceive. I was thin when I went, but I was meager indeed when I returned, my face looking grey and very old, with strange deep lines ploughed in it--my eyes stared unnaturally. I was weak and yet restless. In a while, however, these bad effects of excitement went off, and I regained my normal condition.¹

Currer Bell, now known to be Charlotte Bronte, during her visit in London impressed everyone as being a person with clear judgment and fine sense. Her conversation was genuine and stimulating; she convinced her hearers of her earnest zeal for the truth. At last the question of Currer Bell's identity was settled.² Charlotte was no longer credited with having written her sisters' novels. But, just as she had anticipated, after the revelation of her identity the reviewers of Jane Eyre and Shirley because

¹Ibid., p. 272.

²Ibid., p. 273.

of her sex described her style as "certainly the very antipode of 'lady-like,'"¹ and suggested:

She must learn also to sacrifice a little of her Yorkshire roughness to the demands of good taste; neither saturating her writings with such rudeness and offensive harshness, nor suffering her style to wander into such vulgarities as would be inexcusable--even in a man.²

In the Edinburgh Review, January, 1850, appeared an article written by G. H. Lewes entitled "Mental Equality of the Sexes? Female Literature." Throughout this article the fact of Currer Bell's sex was never forgotten. The article opened with a statement expressing doubt that women would ever rival men in departments of intellectual exertion which demand either a long preparation or a protracted effort of pure thought, and then rather contemptuously pointed out Elizabeth Rigby's error in having presumed Currer Bell to be a man:

We take Currer Bell to be one of the most remarkable of female writers; and believe it is now scarcely a secret that Currer Bell is the pseudonym of a woman. An eminent contemporary, indeed, has employed the sharp vivacity of a female pen to prove "upon irresistible evidence" that Jane Eyre must be the work of a man! But all that "irresistible evidence" is set aside by the simple fact that Currer Bell is a woman. We never, for our own parts, had a moment's doubt on the subject. That Jane herself was drawn by a woman's delicate hand, and that of Rochester equally betrayed the sex of the artist, was to our minds so obvious, as absolutely to shut our ears to all the evidence which could be adducted by

¹Lewes, p. 158.

²Ibid.

the erudition even of a merchande des modes; and that simply because we know that there were women profoundly ignorant of the mysteries of the toilette, and the terminology of fashion (independent of the obvious solution, that such ignorance might be counterfeited, to mislead), and felt that there was no man who could so have delineated a woman--or would so have delineated a man. The fair and ingenious critic was misled by her own acuteness in the perception of details; and misled also in some other way, and more uncharitably, in concluding that the author of Jane Eyre was a heathen educated among heathens,--the fact being that the authoress is the daughter of a clergyman.¹

What was Charlotte's point of view in regard to the criticism of her novels stemming from the controversy over the sex of their author? In her novels she did not ignore the examples set by her predecessors, those early eighteenth-century women who were so careful not to offend, but she did not set them up as models. Her writing was her own. She pictured and discussed life from a feminine standpoint. She expressed her own ideas; she did not conform to the standards set up by men. Charlotte wrote because her emotions were forced into speech, not from an amused observation of life or a feeling of the necessity to reform. Primarily a romanticist, she depended far more on emotional analysis than on producing an exact picture of life. She wrote concrete stories with definite adventures, trying in no way to conform to preconceived ideas and expecting to be judged

¹p. 158.

accordingly. Charlotte fought consistently for the right to be judged on the same principles on which men authors were judged, but she did not claim the absolute equality of women with men. For example, her heroines are plain; her heroes are "masters." Man is the ruler; the woman, his devoted servant. Jane, Shirley, and Lucy Snowe would be defrauded of their intensest joy in loving if they did not feel that their lovers were their masters. When Caroline asked Shirley whether man must indeed be acknowledged woman's superior, Shirley answered, "I would scorn to contend for empire with him. Shall my left hand dispute for precedence with my right? shall my heart quarrel with my pulse? Nothing ever charms me more than when I meet my superior, one who makes me sincerely feel that he is my superior."¹ "In her love, as in that of all Charlotte Bronte's heroines," says Peter Bayne, "there was a 'delicious pride,' but a 'more delicious humility.'"² He goes on to say that he believes that if all the laws giving precedence to men over women were swept away from the law book, women in love would still find joy in surrender.

Charlotte Bronte, discouraged early in her career by Robert Southey's letter, and in later days confronted by her

¹Peter Bayne, Two Great Englishwomen (London: James Clarke & Company, 1881), p. 309.

²Ibid.

husband's unsympathetic attitude, was continually thwarted by the traditional attitude toward women writers. She had to prove to herself and to the world that she was not fighting against nature. She was not unsexed by her vocation, for her art enriched her womanly charm. She had known from the very start that her position would be difficult. She was prepared for obstacles, but she did not compromise with them.

Charlotte had this to say concerning critics who were biased in their criticism of her:

The North British Review duly reached me. Much of the article is clever, and there are remarks which--for me--rob it of importance. To value praise or stand in awe of blame we must respect the source whence the praise and blame proceed, and I do not respect an inconsistent critic. He says, "If Jane Eyre be the production of a woman, she must be a woman unsexed."

In that case the book is an unredeemed error and should be unreservedly condemned. If it is written as no woman would write, condemn it with spirit and decision--say it is bad, but do not eulogise and then detract. I am reminded of the Economist. The critic of that paper praised the book if written by a man, and pronounced it "odious" if the work of a woman.

To such critics I would say, "To you I am neither man nor woman. I come before you as an author only. It is the sole standard by which you have a right to judge me--the sole ground on which I accept your judgment."¹

That Charlotte Bronte and her sisters had anticipated such attitudes as I have quoted is substantiated by

¹Shorter, p. 319.

the statement she made concerning the reasons for the assumption of pseudonyms by herself and her sisters:

Averse to personal publicity, we veiled our names under those of Currer, Acton, and Ellis Bell--the ambiguous choice being dictated by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because--without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called "feminine"--we had a vague impression that authoresses are likely to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward a flattery which is not true praise.¹

As we have seen, their fears concerning bias and discrimination had proved to be correct. The few attacks upon Jane Eyre were not directed against breaches of literary convention; indeed, they testified indirectly to the novel's timeliness, hearing in it a voice from the dangerous north and the dangerous class of oppressed or "outlawed" women. It provided a text on which to hang warnings about female emancipation and rebellious and un-Christian spirit in society.²

Charlotte especially disliked the lowering of critical standards in judging a work of fiction written by a woman; and praise, mingled with allusions to her sex, mortified her. Such was the review written by Lewes. Charlotte was even more disgruntled with Lewes than she was

¹Ibid., p. 18.

²Tillotson, p. 259.

with other critics because in a letter written to him in November, 1849, in answer to a note telling Charlotte that he intended to review Shirley, she had written:

It is about a year and a half since you wrote me; but it seems a longer period, because since then it has been my lot to pass some black milestones in the journey of life. Since then there have been intervals when I have ceased to care about literature and critics and fame; when I have lost sight of whatever was prominent in my thoughts at the first publication of Jane Eyre; but now I want these things to come back vividly, if possible: consequently, it was a pleasure to receive your note. I wish you did not think me a woman. I wish all reviewers believed 'Currer Bell' to be a man; they would be more just to him. You will, I know, keep measuring me by some standard of what you deem becoming to my sex; where I am not what you consider graceful, you will condemn me. All mouths will be open against that first chapter; and that first chapter is as true as the Bible, nor is it exceptionable. Come what will, I cannot, when I write, think always of myself and of what is elegant and charming in femininity; if it is not on those terms my writing will be tolerated, I shall pass away from the public and trouble it no more. Out of obscurity I came, to obscurity I can easily return. Standing afar off, I now watch to see what will become of Shirley. My expectations are very low, and my anticipations somewhat sad and bitter; still, I earnestly conjure you to say honestly what you think; flattery would be worse than vain; there is no consolation in flattery. As for condemnation I cannot, on reflection, see why I should much fear it; there is no one but myself to suffer therefrom, and both happiness and suffering in this life soon pass away.¹

It was Lewes's failure to comply with her wishes that brought forth this somewhat caustic comment from Miss Bronte: "I can be on my guard against my enemies, but God

¹Gaskell, p. 307.

deliver me from my friends!"¹ Lewes answered Charlotte remonstrating with her for quarrelling with the severity and frankness of a review which was dictated by admiration and friendship. Charlotte replied thus:

I will tell you why I was so hurt by that review in the Edinburgh; not because its criticism was keen or its blame sometimes severe; not because its praise was stinted (for, indeed, I think you give me quite as much praise as I deserve), but because after I had said earnestly that I wished critics would judge me as an author, not as a woman, you so roughly--I even thought so cruelly--handled the question of sex. I dare say you meant no harm, and perhaps you will not now be able to understand why I was so grieved at what you probably deem such a trifle; but grieved I was, and indignant too.

However, I will not bear malice against you for it; I know what your nature is: it is not a bad or unkind one, though you would often jar terribly on some feelings with whose recoil and quiver you could not possibly sympathise. I imagine you are both enthusiastic and implacable, as you are at once sagacious and careless; you know much and discover much, but you are in such a hurry to tell it all you never give yourself time to think how your reckless eloquence may affect others; and, what is more, if you knew how it did affect them, you would not much care.

However, I shake hands with you: you have excellent points; you can be generous. I still feel angry, and think I do well to be angry; but it is the anger one experiences for rough play rather than for foul play.²

This attitude persisted, for we see Anne Mozley, in 1853, describing the author of Villette as having gained both in amiability and propriety since she first presented

¹Ibid., p. 319.

²Ibid., p. 320.

herself to the world--soured, coarse, and grumbling; an alien, it might seem, from society, and amenable to none of its laws."¹ It was in answer to this review in the Christian Remembrancer that Charlotte, expressing her resentment at the suggestion that she was an alien from society, said:

There are reasons which make retirement a plain duty; but were no such reasons in existence, were I bound by no such ties, it is very possible that seclusion might still appear to me, on the whole, more congenial than publicity; and the brief and rare glimpses I have had of the world do not incline me to think I should seek its circles with very keen zest--nor can I consider such disinclination a just subject for reproach.²

Charlotte Bronte advanced the status of the woman novelist to a position of equality with men. She was not, like the earlier women novelists, embarrassed by her authorship. Neither was she a crusader. She knew she had faults and she wanted to know what they were. She did not consider her sex, however, as one of these faults. But how could she correct any faults pointed out by critics whose only criticism stemmed from the fact that she was a woman and was writing in an unwomanly manner? Charlotte Bronte maintained that there was no "proper" subject matter for a woman. She firmly believed in her right to be an author, and she demanded criticism on that basis alone.

¹Blackwell, IV, 78.

²Ibid., p. 79.

Once her identity was established, she fought for justice for the woman author. No longer would she allow critics to side-step the issues by namby-pamby remarks, neither condoning nor condemning. Now they were brought face to face with the fact that a woman writer was demanding to be treated as a writer. Charlotte struck stoutly for the woman's right to write frankly as a woman, not merely in accordance with the convention of what it was proper for a woman to write. She wanted the human right to be openly and honestly the woman, just as man had had the human right to be openly and honestly the man. Grant Knight maintained that Jane Eyre paved the way for the subsequent self-assertion of women writers. He said, "It does not take too much imagination to believe that Jane Eyre's influence might be found in the subsequent campaign for the recognized equivalence of the sexes."¹

¹The Novel in English (New York: Richard R. Smith, Inc., 1931), p. 213.

CHAPTER III

THE LITERARY ARTIST

The popularity of her novels did not die with Charlotte Bronte. Readers and professional critics testify to their enduring fame. Swinburne in 1887 had predicted: "It may well be that in the eyes of Englishmen yet unborn not one will be found to have left a nobler memorial than the unforgotten life and imperishable work of Charlotte Bronte."¹ In 1895 Frederic Harrison said of Jane Eyre:

With all its faults, the narrowness of range, its occasional extravagances, Jane Eyre will long be remembered as one of the most poetic pieces of English romance, and among the most vivid master-pieces in the rare order of literary "Confessions."²

Let us see what the new school of modern critics have to say about the reasons for her continued popularity and about her qualities as a literary artist which give her a permanent place in English fiction. There has been a definite change in the critical approach to her novels. Early critics interpreted them on an autobiographical basis, as having their sources in her life. Later, however, since the 1930's, they have been regarded as stemming largely from

¹A Note on Charlotte Bronte (London: Chatto and Windus, Piccadilly, 1877), p. 97.

²Moulton, p. 26. Taken from Studies in Early Victorian Literature by Frederic Harrison, pp. 151, 162.

her great creative imagination. This imagination is shown in her juvenilia, the knowledge of which furnishes us a key to an understanding of her novels. Fannie Ratchford, the pioneer of modern Bronte scholars, maintains that Charlotte's novels are based on her early writings. Therefore it will be necessary to review these briefly in the background of her biography; for just as we cannot understand Charlotte Bronte's creative processes without being acquainted with her juvenilia, we cannot understand her juvenilia without knowing something of her life. The tiny notebooks containing the stories by the Bronte children have been described in Chapter I of this thesis.

Charlotte spent her childhood at Haworth Parsonage, bounded on one side by the bleak Yorkshire moors and on the other by a graveyard, which began, early in her life, to steal from her those whom she loved most. After Charlotte's mother's death in 1821, Miss Branwell, her mother's sister, helped care for the six small Bronte children. She never occupied a very warm place in their hearts, but she is significant in that she helped the Bronte children financially.

The children had brief lessons each day with their father and were allowed to read all the books in his library. The parsonage subscribed to several periodicals and newspapers, among which were the Leeds Intelligencer, the Leeds

Mercury, John Bull, and Blackwood's Magazine.¹ The books she read included the Bible, Pilgrim's Progress, Arabian Nights, Robinson Crusoe, Ivanhoe, Kenilworth, Shakespeare's plays and sonnets, and Byron's poetry. No restrictions were placed on the children's reading; they were permitted to read everything that came into the house.² And it was on these readings, rather than on real life, that their childhood stories were based.

In September, 1824, Charlotte and Emily joined their sisters Maria and Elizabeth in the school at Cowan Bridge. In the spring of 1825, Maria was taken home to die. Elizabeth soon followed her. In the autumn of 1825, Charlotte and Emily returned to the parsonage. Mr. Bronte did not hold the school responsible for the deaths of his two oldest daughters, but Charlotte did. Mr. Wilson, the director of the school, became a symbol of cruelty and strength, qualities which both attracted and repelled Charlotte. He may have been the prototype of a long line of ruthless, brutal characters in her juvenilia.³

In 1831 Charlotte was sent to Miss Wooler's school at Roe Head. She was happier here than she had been at Cowan Bridge; and it was here that she formed what was to

¹Ratchford, The Brontes' Web of Childhood, p. 27.

²Stebbins, p. 52.

³Ibid., p. 54.

be a life-long friendship with Ellen Nussey. After her return to Haworth, Charlotte taught her sisters and later filled two positions as governess, which proved to her that she was not in any way suited to this type of work.

In 1842 Charlotte and Emily went to Brussels to study in the school of Madame Heger. They went to further their accomplishments in order to open a school of their own. Emily, overcome by homesickness, returned to the parsonage; but Charlotte remained until the death of her aunt, who had financed the trip abroad, brought her home. Her friendship, some biographers think her love, for M. Heger bore important fruit later. Aunt Branwell's small legacy to Charlotte and her sisters enabled Charlotte to return to Brussels and continue her studies. But now she was assuming also the role of a teacher as well as that of a student.

As I have mentioned previously, Charlotte's early writing was modeled on her reading. Having had no experiences of her own to speak of, Charlotte borrowed liberally. Her ideas, her language, her characters, and her themes are those which she read. For example: her heroines were modeled on the ladies found in such books as Friendship's Offering and The Keepsake;¹ Zamorna's madness hints at Hamlet; the building of the city seemed to rise from the kingdom of Hell in Paradise Lost; the dwarf Fidic was

¹Ibid., p. 65.

compounded of Scott's Goblin Page and Fenella; the chronic sunlessness of nature and the "tall dark trees leading to a church yard" reflected the Gothic romances of the day;¹ her heroes were copied from models set by Byron; her themes were those of love and revenge which she had read in current magazine stories. Just as Charlotte and the other Bronte children did not hesitate to use other people's stories, they did not hesitate to lift Haworth from its peaceful English surroundings and set it down in the midst of Angria, a country geographically located in Africa.

Angria is a world filled with distortions of reality, the power of resurrection, a disregard of time and space, a severance of cause and effect, women dying for love, and men always scornful and handsome. It is an escape world; a world where actions which Charlotte censured in real life were not just condoned, but enjoyed.² It is these stories that exert a strongly formative influence on Charlotte's work, for she continued writing stories with characters, themes, and incidents which appear in these tales until she was in her twenties. Then her later experiences, especially at Brussels, taught her to rationalize her juvenile romantic material so that it could be used in her mature novels for adult readers.

¹Ibid., p. 67.

²Phyllis Bentley, The Brontes (London: Home and Van Thal Ltd., 1947), p. 23.

We now ask ourselves, "Just how did Charlotte use the material in her juvenilia in her novels?" In answering that question, let us take each novel individually. Jane Eyre possesses many characters which have their prototypes in Charlotte's juvenilia. Edward Fairfax Rochester has a long and roundabout derivation. He is a composite of the Duke of Wellington, Zamorna, and the Emperor of Angria. Along with the general characteristics of the Byronic hero, she added some traits of Zamorna's individuality. This resemblance to Zamorna indicates that she still saw "the god-like Majesty of Angria"¹ beneath the unheroic and less handsome features of an English squire. For example, Rochester's disguising himself as an old gypsy woman and testing Lady Blanche's love is a re-enactment of Zamorna's escapade when he disguised himself as Major Howard and betrayed a group of his lady friends and cousins into saying things which embarrassed them when the trick was discovered.²

Rochester's mad wife, Bertha Mason, is based on Lady Zenobia Ellrington, one of the principal characters in Charlotte's first love story, "Albion and Marina," written in 1830. In this story she is described as capturing the attentions of the Marquis of Douro with her

¹Ratchford, The Brontes' Web of Childhood, p. 204.

²Ibid.

charms. In subsequent stories she is shown attempting to kill Marian Hume, the Marquis's sweetheart, in a fit of madness born of unrequited love. She is pictured as a tall and extremely strong woman. On one occasion she kicked Lord Charles down the stairs, and he described her as "one of the best boxers on record."¹ Zenobia Ellrington, however, accounts for Bertha Mason only in part--she is the noble woman of high and lofty thought who only in fits of passion shows her maniacal tendencies.

The remainder of the picture is found in "The Green Dwarf," written in 1833. In this story the heroine is abducted by the villain and carried to a ruined castle where she is left to the care of an old hag named Bertha. This hag is described as "an old woman bent double . . . her countenance all wrinkled and shriveled . . . while her small red eyes gleamed with fiend-like malignity. In one hand she held a huge bunch of rusty keys, and in the other a dimly glittering torch."² It becomes apparent from this description that this is the prototype of Bertha Mason whom we see roaming the halls of Thornfield on her midnight errands of mischief.

There are also incidents in Jane Eyre which can be traced to Charlotte's earlier writings, the most significant

¹Ibid., p. 205.

²Ibid., p. 206.

of these being the call and answer incident, which is to be found in the same story as Zenobia Ellrington. The Marquis of Douro, in danger of forgetting his faithful sweetheart Marina, was recalled to his senses by the voice and apparition of Marian. The Marquis later discovered that he had heard the call at the same time that Marian had died.¹

In the last of Charlotte's juvenilia, "Henry Hudson and His Sister," we find the model for Jane's resisting the temptation to stay with Rochester. In the early story the hero is Sir William Percy; and Elizabeth, the heroine and Charlotte's double, is a companion-governess who loves and is dishonorably loved by Sir William but who resists his advances. Jane's intensified suffering reflects Elizabeth's situation, and Rochester resembles Zamorna, who had never before in Charlotte's stories been resisted by any woman.²

In Shirley we have fewer transplantations from Angrian soil than in any of Charlotte's novels, but it is saved from complete failure by its leading characters, according to Fannie Ratchford.³ Hiram Yorke is Charlotte's least changed Angrian. He is one of her most familiar figures. In the Young Man's Play he was Wilson Thornton, and he appeared later as a general in Zamorna's army, as

¹Ibid., p. 212.

²Ibid., p. 210.

³Ibid., p. 214.

Lord Charles's guardian, and as Jane Moore's good friend. Throughout, he clung tenaciously to his native speech and customs.

Jane Moore, "the beautiful Angrian, the Rose of Zamorna,"¹ is the prototype of Shirley Keeldar. Being, as Fannie Ratchford contends, "the epitome of Angrian womanhood,"² Jane is intensely patriotic. So is Shirley. Compare Jane's exclamation "Angria is such a glorious land!" to Shirley's "Our England is a bonny island, and Yorkshire is one of her bonniest nooks."³ Shirley, too, agrees in almost every detail of appearance with Jane Moore. Both of them, tall and well formed, possessed white necks and shoulders, which formed a gleaming background for profuse curls as fine as silk.⁴

"Villette," says Fannie Ratchford, "is the most Angrian of Charlotte's novels." There are in this book even more traces of Angria than in her other novels. M. Paul Emanuel owes his existence primarily to Warner Howard Warner, who, from the very beginning of the Angrian tales until the end of them, occupied the position of home secretary. In the course of these stories, Warner is depicted as being:

¹Ibid., p. 217. .

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 219.

⁴Ibid., p. 217.

. . . a little dynamic man of unbounded energy and industry, demanding of others the devotion that he himself freely gave. He was fussy, interfering, dominating, overbearing, and tyrannical in his manners, though unselfishly expending himself and his abilities for his king, his country, and his family. He was nervous, irritable, and hasty, at times venomous in his speech, given to raging tirades when provoked.¹

Despite his small stature, he was fearless, speaking his mind to the king even in that monarch's blackest moods, inspired as often by petty irritation as by sublime principle.²

Place next to this some of Lucy Snowe's phrases describing M. Paul, and one sees the deep resemblance between the two:

"Fiery little man," "most irritable nature," "vivacious, kind, sociable," "a religious little man in his way," "so energetic, so intent, above all, so absolute," "not tall, but active and alive with energy and movement of three tall men," "stern, dogmatic, hasty, imperious."³

Although Charlotte said that John Graham Bretton was based on her publisher, Mr. George Smith, he is also one phase of the many sided Zamorna. He follows Zamorna even more faithfully than does Rochester in Jane Eyre. There are numerous parallels which one can draw between John Bretton and Zamorna. Take the following as examples: Dr. John's tact with children is a reminder of Zamorna's tenderness to children; both Dr. John and Zamorna are selfish in wanting pleasure, happiness, and an atmosphere

¹Ibid., p. 224.

²Ibid., p. 220.

³Ibid., p. 227.

of well-being about them. In addition, there are, according to Fannie Ratchford, innumerable verbal parallels which offer testimony to the identity of Dr. John and Zamorna, such as:

"Dr. John had a fine set of nerves."

[Zamorna] "Cast-iron could not be startled, no more was he."

[Dr. John] "Familiar shape, tall and grand. . . . He knew himself privileged."

[Zamorna] "Tall, grand figure; omnipotent and audacious self."

"Dr. John could think and think well, but he was rather a man of action than thought. . . . His natural attitude was not the meditative, nor his natural mood the sentimental."

"Zamorna was a man of no words at all on sentimental matters, though vigorous enough in his actions."¹

And what could be more characteristic of Zamorna than Dr. John's attitude toward Lucy Snowe? He showed complete indifference until she was put in his care; then when she became attached to him, he showed a sort of careless kindness.²

To make a proper wife for Graham, Charlotte blended Zamorna's two wives, Marian Hume and Mary Percy, into Paulina Home. From Marian Hume, Pauline inherited her simple purity and sweetness; her kinship to the fairies; her resemblance to a lily-of-the-valley or a snowdrop; her

¹Ibid., p. 232.

²Ibid., p. 233.

love of frolic; her occasional gaiety of manner.¹ From Mary Percy, Paulina inherited her soft courtesy of manner, her immature but real and inbred tact, her poise, her haughtiness and fastidious pride; her devotion to her father.²

Lucy's description of the fateful storm at sea in which her lover is lost also has its background in Angrian literature. In "Stanzas on the Fate of Henry Percy" we find the separation of two lovers by a storm. Again in "The Green Dwarf" a young girl is described as sitting and listening to the wind moaning wildly through the trees. The girl's fears translate the moaning into a voice which shows her, in her imagination, her lover's ship tossed about by the storm and finally coming to rest at her feet, a wrecked and shattered hull.³

This comparison of Charlotte's juvenilia with her novels shows how the various fantasies of her childhood and protracted adolescence were purged and refashioned in her adult work. Also since she had been amassing material in written form since her childhood, she wrote with the facility of years of practice. Her brain was not only inventive but also observant of life and people--at Haworth, Cowan Bridge, Roe Head, Brussels, London, the Lakes. In one of her letters

¹Ibid., p. 234.

²Ibid., p. 236.

³Ibid., p. 239.

she described the way in which she molded her experience into fiction:

You are not to suppose that any of the characters are literal portraits. It would not suit the rules of art, nor of my own feelings, to write in that style. We only suffer reality to suggest, never to dictate. The heroines are abstractions, and the heroes too. Qualities I have seen, loved, and admired, are here and there put in as decorative gems, to be preserved in that setting.¹

From this statement we see that her experience had been transmuted into fiction by her imagination, that, in the words of Hinkley, a "germ from the real is enough."²

Meanwhile, what ideas had formed in Charlotte's mind concerning the qualities of good literature? Modern critics consider it only fair to examine an author's own conception of literary art. Charlotte, in her letters to G. H. Lewes, has given us her idea of what good literature is. In the first letter, dated November 6, 1847, she commented on the effect of imagination on real experience:

You warn me to beware of melodrama, and you exhort me to adhere to the real. When I first began to write, so impressed was I with the truth of the principles you advocate, that I determined to take Nature and Truth as my sole guides, and to follow in their very footprints; I restrained imagination, eschewed romance, repressed excitement; over-bright coloring, too, I avoided, and sought to produce something which should be soft, grave, and true.

My work [a tale in one volume] being completed, I offered it to a publisher. He said it was original, faithful to nature, but it would not sell.

¹"Shirley," p. 570.

²P. 311.

I tried six publishers in succession; they all told me it was deficient in 'startling incident' and 'thrilling excitement,' that it would never suit the circulating libraries, and as it was on those libraries the success of works of fiction mainly depended, they could not undertake to publish what would be overlooked there.

You advise me, too, not to stray far from the ground of experience, as I become weak when I enter the region of fiction; you say, 'real experience is perennially interesting, and to all men.'

I feel that this is also true; but, dear sir, is not the real experience of each individual very limited? And, if a writer dwells upon that solely or principally, is he not in danger of repeating himself, and also of becoming an egotist? Then, too, imagination is a strong, restless faculty, which claims to be heard and exercised: are we to be quite deaf to her cry, and insensate to her struggles? When she shows us bright pictures, are we never to look at them, and try to reproduce them? And when she is eloquent, and speaks rapidly and urgently in our ear, are we not to write to her dictation?¹

Realism to Charlotte Bronte meant truth to nature. Realism was to her a vital conception; in her novels it is exalted by independence, simplicity, and innocence. To Charlotte it meant, first and foremost, truthfulness. And because her life was not full of varied experiences, truthfulness would not allow her to deal imaginatively with situations beyond them. "But what sets it apart from other forms of reality," said Bonnell, "is its sublimation, the actualities studied filtering through her sweet maidenly heart before taking their final shape."²

¹Gaskell, p. 255.

²Henry H. Bonnell, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, Jane Austen: Studies in Their Works (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902), p. 13.

When Lewes wrote Charlotte to follow the counsel "shining out of his idol's 'mild eyes,'"¹ meaning, of course, Jane Austen, Charlotte replied:

When authors write best, or, at least, when they write most fluently, an influence seems to waken in them, which becomes their master--which will have its own way--putting out of view all behests but its own, dictating certain words, and insisting on their being used, whether vehement or measured in their nature; new-molding characters, giving unthought-of-turns to incidents, rejecting carefully-elaborated old ideas, and suddenly creating and adopting new ones.

Is it not so? And should we try to counteract this influence? Can we indeed counteract it?²

In this statement Charlotte's idea corresponds to that of Plato. The only difference is that Plato's poet was in a state of ecstasy. This, too, may have been the situation in Charlotte's case; for when she wrote her best, it was at a time when her thoughts flowed freely and rapidly. She really believed in her "demon" of influence. She had explicit faith that her words and images were not merely cleverly devised, but inevitably suggested. Just as Poe dreamed out his fantastic tales and Coleridge wrote his Kubla Khan, Charlotte claimed this same sort of inspiration for her tales of actual Yorkshire life. She was also right in maintaining against Lewes that authors ought to listen to the voice of their genius and obey it--to nurse their

¹Gaskell, p. 261.

²Ibid., p. 262.

fire instead of subduing it. To advise a writer to subdue his fire is to give him bad counsel.

The next letter to Lewes, written on January 18, 1849, expressed Charlotte's feeling of the necessity of poetry in art and differentiated between sentiment and poetry:

You correct my crude remarks on the subject of the 'influence;' well, I accept your definition of what the effects of what influence should be; I recognize the wisdom of your rules for its regulation.

What a strange lecture comes next in your letter! You say I must familiarise [sic.] my mind with the fact, that 'Miss Austen is not a poetess, has no "Sentiment"' (you scornfully enclose the word in inverted commas), 'no eloquence, none of the ravishing enthusiasm of poetry,'--and then you add, I must 'learn to acknowledge her as one of the greatest artists, of the greatest painters of human character, and one of the writers with the nicest sense of means to an end that ever lived.'

The last point only will I ever acknowledge.

Can there be a great artist without poetry?

What I call--what I will bend to, as a great artist, then--cannot be destitute of the divine gift. But by poetry, I am sure, you understand something different to what I do, as you do by 'sentiment.' It is poetry, as I comprehend the word, which elevates that masculine George Sand, and makes out of something coarse, something Godlike. It is 'sentiment,' in my sense of the term--sentiment jealously hidden, but genuine, which extracts the venom from that formidable Thackeray, and converts what might be corrosive poison into purifying elixir.

If Thackeray did not cherish in his large heart deep feeling for his kind, he would delight to exterminate; as it is, I believe, he wishes only to reform. Miss Austen being, as you say, without 'sentiment,' without poetry, maybe is sensible, real (more real than true), but she cannot be great.¹

¹Ibid., p. 263.

By mentioning Thackeray's "purifying elixir," Charlotte placed her seal of approval on his didactic writing.

Charlotte also believed in the subjugation of the real to the ideal. Concerning Thackeray's Henry Esmond, she stated:

The third volume seemed to me to possess the most sparkle, impetus, and interest. Of the first and second my judgment was, that parts of them were admirable; but there was the fault of containing too much History--too little Story. I hold that a work of fiction ought to be a work of creation: that the real should be sparingly introduced in pages dedicated to the ideal. Plain household bread is a far more wholesome and necessary thing than cake; yet who would like to see the brown loaf placed on the table for dessert?¹

Charlotte's power then lies in her imaginative and poetic genius, with which she endowed her fiction. It is her imagination, given full rein, which permitted her to paint fascinating stories. And it is the stories which make her books popular.

And if it is the stories that make her novels good, what is there in them that is so remarkable? Is it the plot? In Jane Eyre the plot is centered on a poor and unwelcome orphan in the home of her aunt, Mrs. Reed. Jane is sent at the age of ten to a semi-charitable institution at Lowood. After eight unhappy years, Jane withdraws to Thornfield Hall, where she is received as governess to a small French girl, the child of a former mistress of

¹Ibid., p. 398.

Edward Rochester, the master of the house. Jane's association with Rochester results in love. The romance is heightened by strange cries and laughter that float through the house at midnight and a frustrated attempt to burn the "master" in his bed. The wedding is interrupted at the altar by witnesses who claim that Rochester already has a living wife--a lunatic whom he has kept secreted away in the upper regions of the house. Resisting Rochester's pleas to stay on with him, Jane leaves Thornfield Hall and after long and painful wandering is received into the home of the Rivers family, who prove to be her cousins. Through them she learns of a fortune awaiting her, and this she divides with them. St. John Rivers, a curate, begs her to marry him and accompany him to India. When on the point of accepting his loveless proposal, Jane hears an unearthly cry of "Jane! Jane!" and leaves the next morning for Thornfield, which she finds a heap of charred ruins. Seeking Rochester, who, she is told, lost his sight and one hand in a fruitless effort to save his crazed wife, who had set fire to the hall. Jane at last finds him, overrules his protests of his unworthiness, and becomes his wife.

In Shirley the opening scene finds Caroline Helstone, a young girl whose father is dead and whose mother has been missing for many years, living with her uncle, the rector

of Briarfield. Caroline's affection for her cousin, Robert Moore, deepens into love; but Robert, reciprocating Caroline's feelings, conquers his sentiment because neither he nor Caroline has money. Robert needs help to stave off ruin. He is a cloth manufacturer on the brink of financial disaster as a result of the Orders in Council and the destruction of his new machinery by disgruntled workers. Caroline becomes close friends with Shirley Keeldar, a young heiress and mistress of Fieldhead Hall, who has just recently returned, accompanied by Mrs. Pryor, her companion. Since Robert Moore is a tenant on the Keeldar estate, he and Shirley are in frequent communication; and the rumor begins to circulate that they would make a good match. Then Louis Moore, Robert's brother and former tutor in the Sympson family, appears. Caroline becomes ill because she believes Robert does not return her love, and during her illness Mrs. Pryor confesses that she is Caroline's mother; Louis looks on in silent agony as Shirley is besieged with suitors.

Finally, Robert Moore, having returned from a business trip to Birmingham and having been shot from ambush, so to speak, confesses to a friend that he has made an unsuccessful proposal of marriage to Shirley. Thus affairs are resolved. Shirley and Louis Moore are brought together, and Caroline wins Robert Moore.

The plot of Villette, like that of Jane Eyre, centers on a governess. The story opens in the home of Mrs. Bretton, Lucy Snowe's godmother. Here she meets Paulina Home, who very shortly leaves to travel with her father on the continent. Not long after Paulina's departure, Lucy returns to her home, where she remains eight years; then, finding herself without friends or fortune, she decides to go abroad after a short experience as companion to an invalid, Mrs. Marchmont. Having landed at Boue-Marine, she decides to go to Brussels and apply for a position to Madame Beck, head of a school for girls. Arriving at the establishment of Madame Beck, Lucy, after a few adventures, is admitted and given a position. Though she shortly becomes a teacher, life in the pensionnat is only a laborious grind, and when the long vacation comes, she is overcome by loneliness. In spite of her stout Protestantism, she creeps one evening into a Catholic church and weeps her misery into foreign ears. Falling outside the door, Lucy is carried to the home of "Doctor John," attending physician at Madame Beck's. His home proves to be none other than that of Lucy's godmother, Mrs. Bretton, and "Doctor John," Mrs. Bretton's son. Lucy recovers rapidly and defies reason by loving John Bretton, who has heretofore professed to be an admirer of Ginevra Fanshawe. At a fire in a theater one evening, John and Lucy rescue a young girl fallen under the feet of

the mob. This girl proves to be Paulina Home, now a countess, Paulina de Bassompierre. John and Paulina become warm lovers, and Lucy becomes at last sensible of the attentions of M. Paul Emanuel, a teacher in Madame Beck's school. M. Paul, before leaving on a trip to the West Indies, sets Lucy up in a school of her own. It is understood that on his return they will marry. The day for M. Paul's arrival comes, after three long years; but Lucy's love is fated not to be fulfilled for a storm sweeps the Atlantic, and the book ends with Lucy's and Paul Emanuel's fate undetermined.

A plot, however, must have qualities other than than of just a good story. If a plot is to be effective, it must maintain unity; that is, a smooth transition from one event to another. It must constitute a whole, single action. The plot of Jane Eyre falls into three parts: the story of Helen Burns, the story of Edward Rochester, the story of St. John Rivers. But by virtue of maintaining a continuous interest in one central figure, that of Jane, there is no lack of unity. The plots are drawn together as successive phases of Jane's experience. Lewis E. Gates maintains:

In spite of its length and wealth of detail, Jane Eyre is an admirable unified work of art. Every moment prepares for, or re-enforces, or heightens by way of subsequent contrast, the effect of the tragic complication in the lives of Rochester and Jane Eyre,--the complication in that passion

which seeming for the moment about to bring perfect happiness to the dreary existence of the little green-eyed, desolate waif of a woman, finally overwhelms her and seems to have wrecked her life. The steady march of destiny may be heard if one will listen for it . . .¹

Neither Shirley nor Villette, however, possesses any such claim to unity. Shirley is split into two independent parts. The first centers around Caroline, the second around Shirley. There is no theme of interest which would serve to combine the two into a single whole. The story is burdened with a number of minor characters who have no contribution to make to the main action. Whole chapters could be lifted out of the book without disturbing the plan as a whole. The two love stories are sometimes lost from view in the smoke and dust of political and religious discussion and economic struggles.

In Villette we have probably the most complicated plot attempted by Charlotte Bronte. It is formed by the interweaving of four groups of persons, each group connected in some way with Lucy Snowe. These four groups are composed of Mrs. Bretton and her son John Graham Bretton, Mr. Home and his daughter Paulina, Girevra Fanshawe and her suitors, and Madame Beck and her cousin M. Paul Emanuel. "Lucy," says Phyllis Bentley, "is too thin a thread to connect" such a vast scheme.² In Villette we have no core of action. It

¹P. 147.

²P. 76.

is a succession of events. One would like, of course, to be able to pronounce the love affair of Paul Emanuel and Lucy Snowe the principal action of the story, but it is so long in developing that, in spite of its warmth and purity when it does catch fire, we have no right to assign it major rank.

Cornelius Weygandt describes the maturing artistry of Charlotte Bronte in Villette; then he explains why it has not realized the popularity which Jane Eyre attained:

The adventures of Lucy Snowe in the Belgian boarding school are far more true to life than the adventures of Jane Eyre in Thornfield. The characters in Villette are all of them believable. The writing is better, with few of the lapses into rhetoric of Jane Eyre. The proportions of the story are better. Charlotte Bronte was maturing in her art. But Villette, better planned, better written, a more completely realized intention than Jane Eyre, has not the "first fine careless rapture" and the richness of passion that make Jane Eyre a thing of lovely splendor in English letters.¹

Just as Charlotte's plots lack unity, they abound in improbabilities. David Cecil asserts that Jane Eyre is a "roaring melodrama."² His opinion is based on such improbabilities as Rochester's being able to conceal his mad wife at Thornfield so imperfectly that she gets loose and roams about the house, without any of his servants and

¹A Century of the English Novel (New York: The Century Co., 1925), p. 120.

²Early Victorian Novelists (London: Balding and Mansell, 1948), p. 126.

guests suspecting anything; and Jane's collapsing on the doorstep of her only surviving relations after her flight from Thornfield. Cecil says that all of the main incidents on which the action turns are "incredible."¹ Phyllis Bentley, however, argues that Jane Eyre escapes being a melodrama by virtue of the ending of the story. Had Jane triumphed, in a worldly sense, the story would have had no saving grace. However, Jane does not triumph in a worldly sense; for she is married to a partially blind, mutilated man--a man who has earned the censure of the world and is living in retirement. By not allowing Rochester to regain his sight completely, by keeping Adele, the illegitimate daughter of Rochester, alive, by having Jane and Rochester drink "a mixed cup of enjoyment," Charlotte has avoided the conventional melodrama.²

Although Villette has never been accused of being melodramatic, it, too, has its improbabilities. The most glaring one is Lucy Snowe's tardy recognition of Doctor John. Since in former years she had known him as a brother, how was it possible that he should escape recognition when he presented himself at Madame Beck's? Or how was it possible that John Bretton should have forgotten Lucy Snowe? It is possible to believe that John Bretton was the only

¹Ibid.

²P. 67.

man on the street to assist Lucy on her arrival in Belgium, but it is straining our imagination to believe that he should again be the only man on the street when she faints six months later. The final blow to an unsuspecting reader falls when the young girl whom John rescues from the fire at the theater turns out to be Paulina Home, his only other friend of childhood. As numerous critics have pointed out, in Villette the "long arm of coincidence is stretched until it becomes positively dislocated."¹

In considering the plot of Charlotte Bronte's novels, it is imperative that we include her angle of narration; for Charlotte handles her story-telling in the first person expertly. Her range, however, is limited. The world she creates is the world of her own inner life; she is her own subject. This does not mean that she writes only about her own character; it only means that her picture of the external world is a picture of her own reactions to the external world. Characters and events are presented only as they appear to Jane Eyre or Lucy Snowe. It is interesting to note that Shirley, the only book she did not write in the first person, is her weakest novel. This, I believe, is a result of the restrictions she put on herself when she began the novel. She was trying to write according to a given form, and Charlotte Bronte

¹Cecil, p. 127.

could not write in that fashion. She had to be free to use her natural talents of storytelling and she best manipulated these talents when she herself was part of the work. Even in Shirley, although not told in the first person, most of the story is told by the principal characters in their journals. In speaking of the autobiographical aspects of the novels, David Cecil says, "Jane Eyre, Villette, The Professor, the best parts of Shirley, are not exercises of the mind, but cries of the heart; not a deliberate self-diagnosis, but an involuntary self-revelation."¹ Kathleen Tillotson points out the dangers of using this angle of narration, then justifies Charlotte's choice by her success in Jane Eyre:

All is seen from the vantage-ground of the single experience of the central character . . . Only ingenuousness or assured mastery would choose such a method; to charge its limitations with the utmost significance, to avoid all its pitfalls, is the fortunate achievement of very few. The single point of view may be easily held at the circumference of the narrative and the emotional interest; but Jane continually, quietly, triumphantly occupies the center, never receding into the role of mere reflector or observer . . . Nor is she ever seen ironically, with the author hovering just visible beyond her, hinting at her obtuseness and self-deception . . .²

Edgar Shannon says that Charlotte has overcome the inherent handicap of the first person narrative by "pertinent shifts from the past to the present tense."³

¹Ibid., p. 121.

²p. 294.

³"The Present Tense in Jane Eyre," Nineteenth-Century Fiction, X (September, 1955), 141.

The amazing vividness of Charlotte Bronte's portrait painting is one quality which makes her work unique. Her art in this respect has not always been acknowledged, however. The following quotations show the change in critical attitude from 1848 to 1917: Elizabeth Rigby, 1848, expressed her disapproval:

The characters and events in Jane Eyre, though some of them masterful in conception, are coined expressly for the purpose of bringing out great effects. The hero and heroine are beings both so singularly unattractive that the reader feels they can have no vocation in the novel but to be brought together; and they do things which, though not impossible, lie utterly beyond the bounds of probability . . . Jane Eyre is merely another Pamela, who, by the force of her character and the strength of her principles, is carried victoriously through great trials and temptations from the man she loves . . . It is a very remarkable book: we have no remembrance of another combining such genuine power with such horrid taste. Both together have equally assisted to gain the great popularity it has enjoyed; for in these days of extravagant adoration of all that bears the stamp of novelty and originality, sheer rudeness and vulgarity have come in for a most mistaken worship.¹

A critic in Fraser's Magazine, 1849, commented:

With regard to the male characters, it is not so much of the original conception, that we wish to complain. The rough sketch is often as correct as it is daring--psychologically faultless. Take, for example, Robert Gerard Moore, half English, half French, a bankrupt mill-owner and a thorough gentleman, a furious Radical who detests the mob, a man of taste and refinement with his heart and soul in the dyeing-vats, lavishly generous, yet ready to sell his love for gold. The author deserves credit for no common skill in combining, out of dissonant elements, a harmonious whole.

¹P. 163.

The character of Shirley is excellently conceived and well sustained . . .¹

Catherine Sedgwick, April, 1853, commented:

Whether she calls herself Jane Eyre, or Lucy Snowe, it does not matter--it is Miss Bronte. She has the intensity of Byron--. She unconsciously infuses herself into her heroine. It is an egotism whose fires are fed by the inferior vitality of others; and how well she conceives others! how she daguerreotypes them!²

George William Curtis, May, 1853, praised Jane's character:

Jane Eyre moved up and down the novel totally regardless of nerves and the "tea-table proprieties." She was a woman bullied by circumstances and coping bravely with a hard lot, and finally proving her genuine force of character by winning the respect and love of a man who had exhausted the world and been exhausted by it: a man in whom the noble instincts were so deeply sunk, that they could only respond to a ray so penetrant and pure that it would not be dispersed in fogs--but which instinctively, when they were touched, would respond and rule the life.³

Algernon Charles Swinburne, 1877, praised Charlotte's genius:

. . . no living English or female writer can rationally be held her equal in what I cannot but regard as the highest and the rarest quality which supplies the hardest and the surest proof of a great and absolute genius for the painting and the handling of human characters in mutual relation and reaction.⁴

F. H. Stoddard, 1900, praised the characterization:

¹P. 693.

²Moulton, p. 28. Taken from Life and Letters, Dewey, ed., p. 349.

³P. 536.

⁴P. 12.

The characters are creations, and their appearance marks an epoch in literature, marks a distinct and definite era in the history of the novel. Before their appearance we had had personages in fiction. In Jane Eyre for the first time in English fiction, the intensity of life-craving which dominates a woman who loves is presented in the pages of the novel; and the voice of the outcry of her longing comes to the world.¹

Butler Wood, 1917, commented:

We have not, in English literature, a novelist whose grasp of his dramatis personae is more absolute than Charlotte Bronte's. Their inmost secret, their subtlest mutabilities of mood and action, are known to that searching gaze, as well as their outward aspect and the effects they make upon each other. They are not, all of them, known sympathetically; the means her scrutiny has used are often coldly analytical; but you must trust her insight.²

Charlotte Bronte once said that she wrote Jane Eyre to prove to her sisters that a beautiful heroine was not a necessary requirement for a novel. "I will show you a heroine as plain and as small as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours."³ Her plain heroine also seems to defend the right of a plain woman to become a heroine, to have a handsome husband, to see all her dreams and wishes come true. The character of Jane Eyre, Charlotte Bronte's most beloved plain heroine, has, however, received

¹Moulton, p. 26. Taken from The Evolution of the English Novel by F. H. Stoddard, p. 63.

²Charlotte Bronte: A Centenary Monograph (London: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., 1917), p. 302.

³Alice G. Fredman, Introduction to Jane Eyre (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), p. xii.

much criticism. Elizabeth Rigby extorted her "pound of flesh" when she termed the book an "anti-Christian composition," and Jane Eyre, "a mere heathen":

We have said that this was a picture of a natural heart. This, to our view, is the great and crying mischief of the book. Jane Eyre is throughout the personification of an unregenerate and undisciplined spirit. It is true Jane does right, and exerts great moral strength, but it is the strength of a mere heathen mind which is a law unto itself. No Christian grace is perceptible upon her. She has inherited in fullest measure the worst sin of our fallen nature--the sin of pride. She is proud, and therefore she is ungrateful too.

Although the auto-biography of Jane Eyre is pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition. There is throughout it a murmuring against the comforts of the rich and against the privations of the poor, which, as far as each individual is concerned, is a murmuring against God's appointment--there is a proud and perpetual assertion of the rights of man--there is that pervading tone of ungodly discontent which is at once the most prominent and the most subtle evil which the law and the pulpit, which all civilized society in fact has at the present day to contend with.¹

Apparently Miss Rigby could accept no deviation from the conventional; for in speaking of Jane's confession of love to Rochester, she said:

Miss Eyre is desired to walk with him in shady alleys, and to sit with him on the roots of an old chestnut-tree towards the close of evening, and of course she cannot disobey her 'master'--whereupon there ensues a scene which, as far as we remember, is new equally in art or nature; in which Miss Eyre confesses her love--whereupon Mr. Rochester drops not only his cigar (which she seems to be in the habit of lighting for him) but his mask, and finally offers not only heart, but hand.²

¹P. 173.

²Ibid., p. 165.

This new concept of a woman's professing her love before ascertaining the love of her partner was condemned as immoral and unladylike. Shirley also was revolutionary, for here we see the heroine "on the tip-toe of expectation," no longer awaiting the coming of her Prince Charming, but "craning her neck out of every window in fierce anticipation, and upbraiding heaven and earth, which kept her buried--out of his way."¹

Also unforgivable was the scene in which Jane listened to Rochester's revelation of his past experiences with women. It was unheard-of for a lady even to think such thoughts, much less to listen to the actual words. That these words were uttered by a man seemed to testify to the complete degradation of the woman. No man entitled to the name of gentleman would have stained the imagination of a girl in that way; no woman entitled to the name of lady would have permitted her imagination to be so stained. According to Charlotte, however, this indelicacy rested on Rochester's shoulders. He was responsible, not Jane; for she was still a child fresh from school. How could she be expected to know the ways of society?

Jane might, in time, however, have been forgiven by critics for listening to Rochester's personal confessions,

¹Margaret Oliphant, The Victorian Age of Literature (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1931), p. 307.

but she could not be pardoned for loving too readily. Nor could Charlotte be pardoned for the bitterness of her first chapters in Jane Eyre. Because of her anti-clericalism and her "vengeful spirit" in portraying the wicked face of Aunt Gateshead, she was called ungrateful, heinous, and heathenish.¹

But this criticism is unjust when one considers that Charlotte not only gives us a picture of a suffering Jane but also justifies her suffering to us. Although we find Jane treated villainously by Mrs. Reed and her brutish son John, Charlotte avoided caricatures by letting us see how natural it was for such persons to be rude and cruel to her:

I was a discord in Gateshead Hall: I was like nobody there; I had nothing in harmony with Mrs. Reed or her children, or her chosen vassalage . . . I know that had I been a sanguine, brilliant, careless, exacting, handsome, romping child--though equally dependent and friendless--Mrs. Reed would have endured my presence more complacently; her children would have entertained for me more of the cordiality of fellow-feeling; the servants would have been less prone to make me the scape-goat of the nursery.²

Charlotte has been blamed for these situations, and it is likely that Jane Eyre is still considered, by some, a dangerous book. But what is virtue without temptation?

¹Ernest Dimnet, The Bronte Sisters (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1927), p. 147.

²Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre (New York: Bigelow, Brown and Co., Inc., 1956), p. 11.

Charlotte Bronte's glory is her purity, her making virtue shine through the temptation. She is really a severe moralist. These criticisms were forthcoming only because men could not conceive that any lady who was conscious of love could have any really "nice" feelings about it. It is this attitude that places Charlotte above her critics.

The philosophy of the book is the right and duty of a personality to defend itself, and this Jane does admirably. She not only resists seduction, she resists the oppressions of the nursery and the schoolroom. Nothing can break her. She is armed with instinctive shrewdness. In the very middle of Rochester's speech concerning his former mistresses, Jane reflects:

I felt the truth of these words; and I drew from them the certain inference, that if I were so far to forget myself and all the teaching that had ever been instilled into me, as--under any pretext--with any justification--through any temptation--to become the successor of these poor girls, he would one day regard me with the same feeling which now in his mind desecrated their memory.¹

Jane is armed with indefeatable self-respect. As she leaves Thornfield, she asks herself, "Who in the world cares for you? or who will be injured by what you do?" The reply came:

I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself.. I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man. I will hold the principles

¹Ibid., p. 353.

received by me when I was sane, and not mad--as I am now. Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour; stringent are they; inviolate they shall be. Preconceived opinions, foregone determinations, are all I have at this hour to stand by: there I plant my foot.¹

Charlotte had created a heroine able to carry the aspirations of several generations, an agent pointing the way for millions of young women striving to realize their own selfhood and to defend their own personality.²

Charlotte answered the "timorous or carping few" in whose eyes whatever is unusual is wrong in her preface to the second edition of Jane Eyre:

Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last. To pluck the mask from the face of the Pharisee, is not to lift an impious hand to the Crown of Thorns.

These things and deeds are diametrically opposed; they are as distinct as is vice from virtue. Men too often confound them; they should not be confounded: appearance should not be mistaken for truth; narrow human doctrines, that only tend to elate and magnify a few, should not be substituted for the world-redeeming creed of Christ. There is--I repeat it--a difference; and it is a good, and not a bad action to mark broadly and clearly the line of separation between them.³

Also in an article in Fraser's, in answer to the criticism of the "immorality" of Jane Eyre, Charlotte asked, "Why not?"

¹Ibid., p. 359.

²Hinkley, p. 275.

³P. vi.

Jane Eyre has been austere condemned by austere critics. It is said that in it the interest depends on the terrible and the immoral,--two elements of interest which cannot be rightly appropriated by fiction. Admitting that the charge is true, we inquire--why not?

The old dramatists, at least, did not judge so; and the result was that they evoked 'high passions and high actions' which stir our hearts to the core . . . They looked terror and death, the momentous issues of life, fearlessly in the face; wherever the true tragic came out, there we find them. And they succeeded in impressing on us a sense of its greatness, its reality, its infinite capacities for grief or gladness, such as we now seldom obtain. Seldom, because, when a woman like Charlotte Bronte does try to evoke that mighty spirit of tragedy which lurks in the heart of every man, she is told that she is creating the horrible, and breaking artistic statutes more immutable than those of the Medes and Persians.¹

Walter Raleigh, in his agreement with Charlotte, has expressed the changed attitude of later critics: "Not until the greatest of women romancers arose in Charlotte Bronte was passion represented as it could only have been conceived by a woman."²

In defense of these charges of "immorality" and coarseness, it must be pointed out that Charlotte was unflinchingly sincere; and whatever of coarseness there may be in her novels came from her fidelity to the life she knew and did not stem from any coarseness in her moral fiber. Among the men and women of her acquaintance it was the custom to speak plainly and to call a spade a spade.

¹"New Novels," p. 577.

²Moulton, p. 30. Taken from The English Novel, 1894, p. 253.

The display of uncurbed passion was familiar to her; hence she frequently depicted her characters as saying words and doing deeds which to some readers seemed unnecessarily coarse, brutal, and cruel. Assuming that the words and the deeds were coarse, the trend of her novels was always towards a higher purpose. Charlotte had no love for garbage, but she had a profound reverence for truth, and her daring mind disposed her to risk everything in its service. "No pure mind," said Hugh Walker in 1913, "was ever contaminated by her works, but the weak have been strengthened and the timorous encouraged."¹

I agree with Mr. Walker. To me the adverse criticism seems as ridiculous as Victorian fashions themselves. There is such a passion for truth on the part of Jane, such a loftiness about the novel as a whole, that it is difficult to understand how it could have offended. Indeed, in the twentieth century it all but passes for prudishness. For was not Jane sorely beset by Rochester when he said, "Is it better to drive a fellow-creature to despair than to transgress a mere human law, no man being injured by the breach? for you have neither relatives nor acquaintances whom you need fear to offend by living with me."² And were not those critics blind who could not see

¹The Literature of the Victorian Era (Cambridge: University Press, 1913), p. 722.

²Jane Eyre, p. 358.

that Jane had nothing to gain by leaving the man she loved and nothing but her self-respect to lose by staying with him? No, not until civilization laughs outright at Jane and her scruples will this first novel of Charlotte Bronte's lose its halo.

Rochester, the most forceful of Charlotte's male characters, has come in for his share of criticism, also. Charlotte does not deny her ideal because of her acquaintance with the actual. The actual was real to Charlotte, but the ideal was more real. Jane Eyre is not blinded to the moral transgressions and spiritual sins of Rochester; however, Jane is stronger, both morally and spiritually, than Rochester. And where conscience existed, and it existed everywhere in Charlotte's vision, not even love had sway. One knows, if not from Rochester, then from Jane, that right will prevail.

The romanticists who preceded Charlotte made their heroes impossible by making them do impossible things from the standpoint of supposable experience. The history of Rochester is the reverse of impossible. He may even seem preposterous to contemporary critics, not because he is called upon to do things contrary to nature, but because he acts strictly in accordance with his nature.

In my opinion, Edward Fairfax Rochester is an imperfect character, his imperfection including a vulgar

callousness of feeling and a disregard of truth. These failures are observed, in the first instance, in his conversation with Jane immediately after her arrival at Thornfield when he interrogates her:

"You have been resident in my house three months?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you came from _____?"

"From Lowood school, in _____ shire."

"Ah! a charitable concern.--How long were you there?"

"Eight years."

"Eight years! you must be tenacious of life. I thought half the time in such a place would have done up any constitution! No wonder you have rather the look of another world."¹

In my mind the words "charitable concern" stand out in this conversation. He seems to be speaking his thoughts without any concern for the feelings of Jane. The second imperfection of character, his disregard for truth, is shown in Rochester's next conversation when he calls himself an "old bachelor" who is not fond of the prattle of children.²

Charlotte defended his imperfection by showing the reader that he had suffered wrongs. His elder brother had prejudiced his father against him. His father, anxious that he should be rich, had co-operated with his brother in placing him in "what he considered a painful position, for the sake of making his fortune." The nature of the

¹Jane Eyre, p. 135.

²Ibid., p. 144.

injury is not disclosed at this stage; but his "spirit could not brook what he had to suffer." His misfortune had caused him to lead "an unsettled kind of life," and since the death of his brother, when he became master of Thornfield, he had scarcely stayed at the place for a fortnight altogether.¹ "Mr. Rochester has a thoughtful nature and a very feeling heart," Charlotte wrote, in an effort to clarify him for W. S. Williams. "He lives for a time as too many other men live, but being radically better than most men, he does not like that degraded life and is never happy in it . . . Such at least was the character I meant to portray."²

In the preface to The Professor Charlotte told what she intended to do with her hero and why. She explained the guide that she followed in delineating a hero:

I said to myself that my hero should work his way through life as I had seen real living men work theirs--that he should never get a shilling he had not earned--that no sudden turns should lift him in a moment to wealth and high station; that whatever small competency he might gain, should be won by the sweat of his brow; he should master at least half the ascent of "the Hill of Difficulty"; that he should not marry a beautiful girl or a lady of high rank. As Adam's son he should share Adam's doom, and drain throughout life a mixed and moderate cup of enjoyment.

I find the publishers in general scarcely approved of this system, but would have liked something more imaginative and poetical--something more

¹Ibid., p. 142.

²Hinkley, p. 258.

consonant with a highly wrought fancy, with a taste for pathos, with sentiments more tender, elevated, unworldly.¹

And once again we hear the critics voicing their opinions. Elizabeth Rigby, 1848, complained:

In Jane Eyre one can find that highest moral offence a novel writer can commit, that of making an unworthy character interesting in the eyes of the reader. Mr. Rochester is a man who deliberately and secretly seeks to violate the laws both of God and man, and yet we will be bound half our lady readers are enchanted with him for a model of generosity and honour. We would have thought that such a hero had had no chance, in the purer taste of the present day; but the popularity of Jane Eyre is a proof how deeply the love for illegitimate romance is implanted in our nature. Not that the author is strictly responsible for this. Mr. Rochester's character is tolerably consistent. He is made as coarse and as brutal as can in all conscience be required to keep our sympathies at a distance. In point of literary consistency the hero is at all events impugnable.²

It is interesting to observe that even from the lips of Miss Rigby, Charlotte was exonerated of any guilt in the character of Rochester. The critic blamed the reader entirely for misinterpreting Rochester's character.

Swinburne, in 1877, declared that "Whatever in Jane Eyre is other than good is also less than important."³ Then, speaking precisely concerning the character of Rochester, he wrote, "The figure of Edward Rochester in

¹(New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1954), p.vi.

²p. 166.

³p. 26.

this book remains, and seems likely to remain, one of the only two male figures of wholly truthful workmanship and vitally heroic mold ever carved and colored by a woman's hand."¹

These characters which Charlotte drew could exist in no setting other than the one Charlotte depicted. Jane's rebellion can be understood when we observe her surroundings at Gateshead Hall. She was alone among people who did not like her, in a place where there was no comforting sunshine for a young child, but only wet, stormy landscape viewed through a rain-drenched window:

Folds of scarlet drapery shut in my view to the right hand; to the left were the clear panes of glass, protecting, but not separating me from the drear November day. At intervals, while turning over the leaves of my book, I studied the aspect of that winter afternoon. Afar, it offered a pale blank of mist and cloud; near, a scene of wet lawn and storm-beat shrub, with ceaseless rain sweeping away wildly before a long and lamentable blast.²

And could one expect her to become a bright, cheerful child at Lowood? Here she was to see her best friend die from lack of proper food and attention. It was Jane's surroundings which prevented her being a gay, carefree woman. How could a child who has been subdued all her life blossom into anything other than a shy, unprepossessing individual?

¹Ibid., p. 27.

²P. 2.

Not only does the scenery reveal the character, but the changes in scenery accompany the changes of mood of the heroine. In Jane Eyre, for example, every action is accompanied by its complement in the external aspects of nature. In depicting the general dreariness and coldness of her life at Lowood, Jane describes the long cold church service which lasted all day and which both pupils and teachers were forced to endure. This picture is heightened and retained by the description of the homeward journey:

At the close of the afternoon service we returned by an exposed and hilly road, where the bitter winter wind, blowing over a range of snowy summits to the north, almost flayed the skin from our faces.¹

Jane's happiness in her life at Thornfield and her joy in loving Rochester are reflected in the cheerful and beautiful atmosphere of the orchard in which Jane finds herself just previous to Rochester's proposal:

I went apart into the orchard. No nook in the grounds more sheltered and more Edenlike; it was full of trees, it bloomed with flowers: a very high wall shut it out from the court, on one side; on the other, a beech avenue screened it from the lawn. At the bottom was a sunk fence; its sole separation from lonely fields: a winding walk, bordered with laurels and terminating in a giant horse-chestnut, circled at the base by a seat, led down to the fence.²

Particularly revealing is the word "Edenlike." To me, this symbolizes Jane's complete happiness. But immediately

¹Ibid., p. 64.

²Ibid., p. 279.

following Rochester's proposal and Jane's acceptance, the weather changed:

But what had befallen the night? The moon was not yet set, and we were in shadow: I could scarcely see my master's face, near as I was. And what ailed the chestnut tree? it writhed and groaned, while wind roared in the laurel walk, and came sweeping over us.¹

The storm continued throughout the night, and the culmination of its fury was described by Adele the next morning. Lightning had struck the horse-chestnut tree in the night and had split half of it away--a symbol of the future separation of Jane and Rochester.

Just as the splitting of the chestnut tree is symbolic, so are many of the other changes in weather and atmosphere. Almost every event in Jane Eyre is foretold by the atmosphere preceding it, or the result of an action on the lives of the characters is paralleled by the changes in nature immediately following it. Examples are the deep, ominous silence that pervaded Thornfield the night Mr. Mason was attacked by the maniac wife; the maniac wife's visit to Jane's room on the night before the wedding when she ripped the wedding veil in half, signifying that Jane and Rochester would be separated; the rainy morning when Jane on her return to Thornfield found Rochester blind. Yes, the finest passages inevitably lead to some dramatic effect

¹Ibid., p. 289.

and give a mood parallel to the impending action. "The scenery," says Henry Bonnell, "is a parable, a miracle; a human life is the thing signified, the thing wrought upon."¹

The next quality to be considered and the quality with which no critic has found fault, is Charlotte's ability to depict nature. Even the pen of Miss Rigby was forced to be complimentary when she spoke of this aspect of Currer Bell's art. She granted "him" the position of artist when she said, "Let him describe the simplest things in nature-- a rainy landscape, a cloudy sky, or a bare moorside, and he shows the hand of a master . . ."² Lewes also wrote of her power in depicting the external aspects of nature:

The aspects of external nature were painted with fidelity,--the long cheerless winter days, chilled with rolling mists occasionally gathering into the strength of rains,--the bright spring morning,--the clear solemn nights,--were all painted to your soul as well as to your eye, by a pencil dipped into a soul's experience for its colors.³

Lewes, like everyone else, ranked Charlotte's pictures of nature in tumult as her best ones. He gave as his reason her sympathy with this view of nature; it is this aspect that she knows best. The following passages he took from Shirley:

¹p. 40.

²p. 174.

³p. 158.

I long to hear the sound of the waves--ocean waves!--and to see them as I have imagined them in dreams, like tossing banks of green light, strewn with vanishing and reappearing wreaths of foam, whiter than lilies.

There is only one cloud in the sky; but it curtains it from pole to pole. The wind cannot rest: it hurries sobbing over hills of sullen outline, colourless with twilight and mist. Rain has beat all day on that church tower: it rises dark from the stony enclosure of its graveyard; the nettles, the long grass, and the tombs all drip with wet.

The thunder muttered distant peals; but the storm did not break till evening, after we had reached our inn; that inn being an isolated house at the foot of a range of mountains. The hills seemed rolled in sullen mist, and when the rain fell in whitening sheets, suddenly they were blotted from the prospect; they were washed from the world!¹

Perhaps one of the most heart-rending descriptive passages is the final scene in Villette, in which a storm at sea threatens Lucy Snowe's chances of happiness. It is in this passage that one can truly sympathize with Lucy, for here we hear Lucy's soul pour forth her agonized cry:

The skies hang full and dark--a rack sails from the west; the clouds cast themselves into strange forms--arches and broad radiations; there rise resplendent mornings--glorious, royal, purple as monarch in his state; the heavens are one flame; so wild are they, they rival battle at its thickest--so bloody, they shame Victory in her pride. I know some signs of the sky; I have noted them ever since childhood. God, watch that sail! Oh! guard it!

The wind shifts to the west. Peace, peace, Banshee--"keening" at every window! It will rise--it will swell--it shrieks out long: wander as I may through the house this night, I cannot lull the

¹Ibid., p. 162.

blast. The advancing hours make it strong: by midnight, all sleepless watchers hear and fear a wild south-west storm.

That storm roared frenzied for seven days. It did not cease till the Atlantic was strewn with wrecks: it did not lull till the deeps had gorged their full of sustenance. Not till the destroying angel of tempest had achieved his perfect work would he fold the wings whose waft was thunder-- the tremor of whose plumes was storm.

Peace, be still! Oh! a thousand weepers, praying in agony on waiting shores, listened for that voice, but it was not uttered--not uttered till, when the hush came, some could not feel it: till, when the sun returned, his light was night to some!¹

Although the tumultuous aspects of nature are believed to be Charlotte's best, her pictures of nature in its more tranquil aspects are beautiful also. The following passages are, I believe, illustrative of this fact. The first passage is Jane Eyre's description of the rookery at Thornfield. The morning after her arrival, Jane descended the steps of Thornfield Hall, stepped over the threshold, and observed:

It was a fine autumn morning; the early sun shone serenely on embrowned groves and still green fields: advancing on to the lawn, I looked up and surveyed the front of the mansion. It was three stories high, of proportions not vast, though considerable: a gentleman's manorhouse, not a nobleman's seat: battlements round the top gave it a picturesque look. Its grey front stood out well from the background of a rookery, whose cawing tenants were now on the wing: they flew over the lawn and grounds to alight in a great meadow, from which these were separated by a sunk fence, and where an array of mighty old thorn trees, strong,

¹Villette (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1952), p. 450.

knotty, and broad as oaks, at once explained the etymology of the mansion's designation. Farther off were hills: not so lofty as those round Lowood, nor so craggy, nor so like barriers of separation from the living world; but yet quiet and lonely hills enough, and seeming to embrace Thornfield with a seclusion I had not expected to find existent so near the stirring locality of Millcote.¹

The second passage has been lifted from Jane's thoughts, which were interrupted by the appearance of the cloaked figure of Rochester as he rode across the lonely, icy terrain on his way to Thornfield:

From my seat I could look down on Thornfield: the grey and battlemented hall was the principal object in the vale below me; its woods and dark rookery rose against the west. I lingered till the sun went down amongst the trees, and sank crimson and clear behind them. I then turned eastward. On the hill-top above me sat the rising moon; pale yet as a cloud, but brightening momentarily: she looked over Hay, which, half lost in trees, sent up a blue smoke from its few chimneys; it was yet a mile distant, but in the absolute hush I could hear plainly its thin murmurs of life. My ear too felt the flow of currents: in what dales and depths I could not tell: but there were many hills beyond Hay, and doubtless many becks threading their passes. That evening calm betrayed alike the tinkle of the nearest streams, the sough of the most remote.²

Then, after Rochester's departure for and Jane's return to Thornfield, Jane, lingering outside the house, hesitant to enter, found both her eyes and spirit drawn from the house to the sky above her:

¹p. 110.

²Ibid., p. 124.

--a blue sea absolved from taint of cloud; the moon ascending it in solemn march; her orb seeming to look up as she left the hill tops, from behind which she had come, far and farther below her, and aspired to the zenith, midnight-dark in its fathomless depth and measureless distance: and for those trembling stars that followed her course; they made my heart tremble, my veins glow when I viewed them.¹

Charlotte excels not only in describing nature but also in describing characters. Probably one of the most unsympathetic pictures we have is that of Madame Beck, the mistress of espionage in the school at Villette:

I have seen her feelings appealed to, and I have smiled in half-pity, half-scorn at the appellants. None ever gained her ear through that channel, or swayed her purpose by that means. On the contrary, to attempt to touch her heart was the surest way to rouse her antipathy, and to make of her a secret foe. It proved to her that she had no heart to be touched: it reminded her where she was impotent and dead. Never was the distinction between charity and mercy better exemplified than in her. While devoid of sympathy, she had a sufficiency of rational benevolence: she would give in the readiest manner to people she had never seen--rather, however, to classes than to individuals. "Pour les pauvres" she opened her purse freely--against the poor man, as a rule, she kept it closed. No private sorrow touched her; no force or mass of suffering concentrated in one heart had power to pierce hers. Not the agony in Gethsemane, not the death on Calvary, could have wrung from her eyes one tear.²

The same power that enabled Charlotte to paint such vivid descriptions of nature and character enabled her to paint pictures of horror. Jane was filled with terror on more than one occasion, and the reader, too, is carried with

¹Ibid., p. 129.

²p. 64.

her by means of these descriptions, both of the circumstances surrounding the heroine and of the psychological effect of these experiences on her. Particularly effective are the descriptions of the sounds which emanated from Bertha Mason. Jane's first description of these sounds is as follows:

When thus alone, I not infrequently heard Grace Poole's [for this is the person to whom Rochester had attributed the noises] laugh: the same peal, the same low, slow ha! ha! which, when first heard, had thrilled me: I heard, too, her eccentric murmurs; stranger than her laugh. There were days when she was quite silent; but there were others when I could not account for the sounds she made.¹

These sounds, which Charlotte leaves unaccountable, are perhaps, the most vivid; for their source is left to the reader to imagine. And what can be more terrifying than the unknown?

The scene in which Mason, the stranger from the West Indies, was attacked by the maniac does not leave these sounds to our imagination, however. Being summoned to stay with Mason while Rochester went for the doctor, Jane, upon approaching the room, remembered having seen it before:

It was hung with tapestry; but the tapestry was now looped up in one part, and there was a door apparent, which had then been concealed. This door was open; a light shone out of the room within: I heard thence a snarling, snatching sound, almost like a dog quarrelling. Mr. Rochester, putting down his candle, said to me, "Wait a minute," and he went

¹Jane Eyre, p. 122.

forward to the inner apartment. A shout of laughter greeted his entrance; noisy at first, and terminating in Grace Poole's own goblin ha! ha! She then was there.¹

Throughout the rest of the night Jane heard but three sounds, "a step creak, a momentary renewal of the snarling, canine noise, and a deep human groan."² Thus we have implanted in our mind the picture of some horrible human beast.

The night preceding Jane's marriage day was probably the most foreboding of her experiences. In her dream she saw Thornfield Hall a ruin and Rochester departing for a distant country. As she sought a higher vantage point from which she could view his departure, Jane lost her grip on the small child which she was carrying, let it fall to the ground, lost her balance on the wall, and fell. At this point she awoke to an even more ominous vision than she had beheld in her dream. A form emerged from her closet holding aloft Jane's wedding clothes. It put Jane's veil on its head and turned to the mirror. It is this reflection which Jane described to Rochester on the following morning:

"Its features were fearful and ghastly to me--oh, sir, I never saw a face like it! It was a discoloured face--it was a savage face. I wish I

¹Ibid., p. 233.

²Ibid., p. 235.

could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments.!"

"Ghosts are usually pale, Jane."

"This, sir, was purple: the lips swelled and dark; the brow furrowed; the black eyebrows widely raised over the blood-shot eyes."

"Ah!--what did it do?"

"Sir, it removed my veil from its gaunt head, rent it in two parts, and flinging both on the floor, trampled on them."¹

As the apparition retreated to the door, it stopped and held the candle close to Jane's face, extinguishing it under her very eyes. At this point our heroine fainted. And well might she faint. Which of us could have endured more? As Phyllis Bentley observes, Charlotte's wild moorlands, her candle-lit interiors, her chill dawns, her moonlit evenings, her dreams,--all are stamped on the reader's mind; her descriptions of the "drink-sodden lunatic" are truly terrifying.²

Although critics agree that Charlotte is a master in creating atmosphere, they charge her with two serious defects in style. One serious defect is her lack of humor. It is when Charlotte tries to be humorous that she falls short. She is completely unacquainted with the aspects of life which would prove funny to her reader. Henry H. Bonnell maintains that her absence of wit was caused by her suffering and unworldliness.³ Hugh Walker, crediting lack

¹Ibid., p. 320.

²p. 69.

³p. 105.

of humor as being Charlotte's greatest defect, attributes this fault to nature. "She is always desperately in earnest," he says; "she has no lightness of touch, she cannot believe that there are occasions when a smile is more effective than a sermon and a jest more crushing than a blow."¹ There is material for humor in her novels, but Charlotte does not take advantage of these opportunities. Take, for instance, the encounter of the curate, Mr. Donne, with Shirley's dog Tartar. This scene has great humorous possibilities. But Charlotte treated it in the same manner as she treats death-bed scenes. There is no attempt made to bring out the comical aspects of a very prim and pompous clergyman being chased pell mell up the stairs by a great, hulking, growling monster of a dog. Although Charlotte misses opportunities for humor, she sometimes amuses when she does not mean to. What could be funnier than the picture we are given of Edward Rochester dressed in the shawl and bonnet of an old gypsy woman? Even Rochester's proposal, which we know Charlotte did not intend to be comical, brings a smile of ironic amusement to the faces of some readers today.

Charlotte is also deficient in reproducing convincing dialogue. The most censured dialogue is that of Lady Blanche Ingram. It seems incongruous to hear

Lady Blanche say, in speaking to her mother, "Am I right, Baroness Ingram, of Ingram Park?" But this style is made even more glaring when her mother replies, "My lily-flower, you are right now, as always."¹ And who could imagine a lady speaking to a servant thus: "Cease that chatter, blockhead! and do my bidding."² But these, too, are Lady Blanche's words. And surely no woman seeking to ensnare a husband would speak to him thus:

"I am resolved my husband shall not be a rival, but a foil to me. I will suffer no competitor near the throne; I shall exact an undivided homage: his devotions shall not be shared between me and the shape he sees in his mirror. Mr. Rochester, now sing, and I will play for you."

"I am all obedience," was the response.

"Here then is a Corsair-song. Know that I doat on Corsairs; and for that reason, sing it 'con spirito.'"³

It is with this type of person that Charlotte fails most miserably when writing dialogue, a failure which can be attributed to the fact that her acquaintance with such people was extremely limited. Charlotte's only contact with people of this type occurred when she held the positions of governess.

With the exception of her dialogue and her lack of humor, Charlotte Bronte's style is, on the whole, powerfully

¹Jane Eyre, p. 199.

²Ibid., p. 216.

³Ibid., p. 201.

imaginative and poetic. Charlotte may be called an imaginative artist in prose. "Her beauty of imagery and passionate originality make possible her peculiar poetic recreation of life," says Lewis Gates. "Her style has none of the sharp falsetto note that might be expected from a woman in a passion."¹

At times, however, when her imagination is unrestrained, the result is what Horace termed "purple patches." An example of this faulty style is such a passage as the one in which Caroline has a dream and speaks her thoughts aloud, crying out in anguish her love for Robert Moore, and the one in which Jane is inspired to paint a symbolic picture of herself. These passages "put the rest of the book out of focus," says David Cecil. "They are obscure and sometimes ridiculous."²

She used such poetic devices as alliteration, imagery, and long, sustained sentences, as illustrated by the following passage from Jane Eyre:

It was now the sweetest hour of the twenty-four:--
 "Day its fervid fires had wasted," and dew fell
 cool on panting plain and scorched summit. Where
 the sun had gone down in simple state--pure of the
 pomp of clouds--spread a solemn purple, burning
 with the light of red jewel and furnace flame at
 one point, on one hill-peak, and extending high and
 wide, soft and still softer, over half heaven.³

¹P. 163.

²P. 128.

³P. 279.

Even though her writing is often "plastered with undisciplined rhetoric, filled with imagery, and spasmodic with ejaculation,"¹ it is still a powerful agent in Charlotte's favor by virtue of the fact that she manages to infuse her personality into it. It is her imagination that once again saves her. Cecil points out:

There is hardly a page where we do not meet, sandwiched between commonplace and absurdity, some evocative image, some haunting, throbbing cadence. 'Little brown birds stirring occasionally in the hedge, like single russet leaves that had forgotten to drop.' --at every turn of its furious course Charlotte Bronte's imagination throws off some such glinting spark of phrase.²

It is these sparks that occasionally blaze up to give us such passages as the one in Villette which describes the effect on Lucy Snowe of the actress Rachel as she portrayed Vashti.

I longed to see a being of whose powers I had heard reports which made me conceive peculiar anticipations. I wondered if she would justify her renown: with strange curiosity, with feelings severe and austere, yet of riveted interest, I waited. She was a study of such nature as had not encountered my eyes yet: a great and new planet she was: but in what shape? I waited her rising.

She rose at nine that December night; above the horizon I saw her come. She could shine yet with pale grandeur and steady might; but that star verged already on its judgment day. Seen near, it was a chaos--hollow, half-consumed: an orb perished or perishing--half lava, half glow.

I had heard this woman termed "plain," and I expected bony harshness and grimness--something

¹Cecil, p. 110.

²Ibid., p. 111.

large, angular, sallow. What I saw was the shadow of a royal Vashti: a queen, fair as the day once, turned pale now light twilight, and wasted like wax in flame.

For a while--a long while--I thought it was only a woman, though a unique woman, who moved in might and grace before this multitude. By-and-by I recognized my mistake. Behold! I found upon her something neither of woman nor of man: in each of her eyes sat a devil. These evil forces bore her through the tragedy, kept up her feeble strength--for she was but a frail creature; and as the action rose and the stir deepened, how wildly they shook her with their passions of the pit! They wrote HELL on her straight, haughty brow. They turned her voice to the note of torment. They writhed her regal face to a demoniac mask. Hate and Murder and Madness incarnate she stood.

It was a marvellous sight: a mighty revelation.

It was a spectacle low, horrible, immoral.¹

Although clogged with metaphors, this passage has the compelling force of genius:

. . . in spite of her fondness for melodramatic incident, Miss Bronte bridles her tongue and speaks with a terseness, a precision of phrase, and a reticence that might well serve as models for such modern masters of sensational fiction as Hall Caine. Charlotte Bronte is in very truth an imaginative artist in prose. She is loyal to the traditions of the best English literature. She has a delicate sense of the worth of words and of the possible beauty of sentences and of the charm of the carefully-wrought paragraph. And this instinct for style is one more reason--and a prepotent one--why her novels are not going to be speedily swept into the dust-bins like the thousands and one novels of the "lady novelists" of today,-- improvisers all, ready and slovenly reporters of personal anecdote "femmes qui parlent."²

¹P. 234.

²P. 163.

The same themes recur in all of Charlotte's novels. In her stories the struggle for life is the struggle for affection. Sympathy for human love, coupled with the belief in its power to bring happiness, is the theme of all her novels. In each story the heroine is striving for happiness, and the plot of the story is the process by which she is unexpectedly given great stores of appreciation, sympathy, and love. Jane Eyre, at the beginning of her story, is an isolated lonely figure, without a friend in the world. At the close, she has gained a fortune, three cousins, two of whom are as good as sisters, and a husband. Lucy Snowe in Villette has the same fate. After years of loneliness, she regains her old friends, who are twice as friendly as before. Hers is a story of her search for sympathy and her finding it in Monsieur Paul. In Shirley the interest lies in the reader's wish to see Caroline Helstone, Shirley, and Louis Moore duly receiving their share of love. All of Charlotte's heroines are lovers of life and of life only. They are all bent on getting happiness through love. Charlotte makes Jane Eyre's and Lucy Snowe's chances of happiness next to impossible. She is constantly checking and subduing their dreams of happiness. Such dreams are madness, she says; and she makes her heroines plain and prim and outwardly cold, in order to make the chances of happiness fantastic. She was aiming,

as we know from the preface to The Professor, against the fallacious romanticism of the day. Therefore she placed Jane and Lucy in adverse circumstances such as she was personally acquainted with, so that they may look the hardest facts of life full in the face. Charlotte's heroines are definite and resolute persons. They do not indulge in self-analysis; they have no doubts about duty; they have no moral or spiritual struggles. Their minds are clear; their only quarrel is with circumstance.

From this study of the art of her novels, it can be concluded that Charlotte Bronte was truly a woman of genius. And in spite of all that has been written about her and said about her, and all that she has said about herself, a mystery still surrounds her. Faulty though her novels may be, they still wear a halo that time has not yet dimmed.

Her novels were extremely popular during her lifetime notwithstanding the fact that the author was a woman. But since the Victorian age was an age in which emotion was to be suppressed at all costs, Charlotte's writings sometimes received harsh criticisms. However, in spite of the sometimes cruel and unjust criticisms, Jane Eyre went into three editions immediately. The reading public was not concerned with her style, but her stories, and with these they were well pleased. In fact, these criticisms

probably added to the popularity of Jane Eyre with the public, for there are few of us who can resist the impulse to delve into a novel which has been criticized. Although our motives may differ, the result is the same--a rush for copies of the questioned material.

Although Jane Eyre received the most scorching criticism, it was also Jane Eyre which was her most popular novel during her lifetime and which has remained the most popular. Grant Knight comments on Charlotte's being a one-book author: "Critics may prefer Shirley or Villette but it was Jane Eyre that brought uncomfortable publicity and that has ever since preserved its writer's name in the front ranks of the makers of English fiction."¹ It is amazing that Charlotte was able in her lifetime to overcome the criticisms of men extremely prejudiced against women who usurped a man's position. That in itself was a major accomplishment. But even more astounding is the place she occupies in literature today. She is one of the few novelists of her age who are read purely for enjoyment and entertainment by modern readers. Today, Jane Eyre, Charlotte's most controversial novel, is placed on the shelves of even the young-adult sections of public libraries.

Even more astonishing than her popularity with the reading public is the high esteem in which she is held by

¹p. 214.

modern standards of criticism. Today, when imagination and originality are at a premium, Charlotte Bronte's works are ranked among the best in English fiction. Richard Chase says that Jane Eyre seems the most exciting of Victorian novels because it "translated the social customs of the times into the form of mythical art, whereas many other Victorian novels were translated by the social customs into more or less tiresome canting."¹

The secret of her attraction lies in the seriousness and the passion with which she undertook her writing--passion in the sense of Bonnell's definition:

The word passion means, in its simplicity, passivity, as opposed to activity,--hence susceptibility, receptivity; which implies, when the active force at work is painful, suffering. All true passion, then, is simple suffering, due to extreme susceptibility, and is opposed by a whole circumference to the ideal passion, it is perforce noble; differing from that in the degree of its nobility by the difference between the hobly human, and yet because human, imperfect, and the inevitable divine.²

The flood-waters of her soul poured out as she wrote; and one is amazed at the revelation, the sweep, the volume, the intensity. Because she was so painfully, terribly sincere, one can never quite succeed in condemning her.

¹William Van O'Conner (editor), Forms of Modern Fiction (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1948), p. 103.

²P. 80.

Charlotte Bronte, then, is an interpreter of the lonely heart, and in the boldness and sincerity of her interpretation she has carved a permanent place for herself in the gallery of the great. It is this passionate "feeling" that places her above the other authors of her age. These views are substantiated by the following criticisms: Wilbur L. Cross, in praising Jane Eyre, has said, "No book was ever written with sincerer motives, or sprang more directly from an aching heart."¹ Richard Chase has commented:

The Brontes' tremendous displacement of the domestic values toward the tragic and mythical, though it falls short of ultimate achievement, gives their work a margin of superiority over that of other Victorian novelists. The Brontes were more fully committed to art than most of their contemporaries. They "rebelled" only in the sense that they translated the Victorian social situation into mythical forms. And this reminds us that the fault of much of our "new criticism" of the best nineteenth-century literature is to mistake art for rebellion.²

Robert Lovett attributes Charlotte's power to a deep inner feeling:

The faults in Charlotte Bronte's novels must be dwelt upon because they reveal the groping, casual character of the English novel as a literary form, the more significantly since the work is by a woman of genius. They are personal documents written with an eloquence which springs from deep feeling. In one direction this feeling found complete utterance. Charlotte Bronte's experience was limited in respect to the outer world, but her inner life received constant inspiration and sympathy from nature.³

¹The Development of the English Novel (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1909), p. 230.

²Van O'Conner, p. 119.

³The History of the Novel in England (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1932), p. 282.

It is this "feeling," or imagination, that enabled Charlotte to write stories that capture our attention. As we read, we are not aware of the faults of her plots because we are carried along in her story. We are eager to find out what is going to happen next. Even when the events are improbable we do not mind, for we still feel her power. She is a first-rate story teller and we, as readers, are aware of it.

Ernest A. Baker lends his voice to this view:

Clumsiness and glaring improbabilities in the plot, blunders and absurdities in the picturing of a society to which Charlotte Bronte was a complete stranger, were as nothing beside the fierce sincerity with which she depicted life as it had imprinted itself on her quivering sensibilities, from childhood to womanhood. . . . The absurdities and improbabilities escape challenge in the fervency and conviction of the story-telling; the snags vanish in the rush of the current. For the frankness and honesty are transparent.¹

Even when Charlotte fails in presenting some character, and this she does frequently, we do not condemn; for we are seeing through her eyes, and through them the characters are true enough. Even Bertha Mason, who is really not a character at all because she appears so seldom, serves her purpose beautifully. She creates that air of suspense which pervades Jane Eyre. And again it is Charlotte's imagination that creates this horrible creature and stamps her on the reader's mind.

¹The History of the English Novel (London: H. F. & G. Witherby Ltd., 1937), III, 37.

Again it is imagination, Charlotte's unequaled and indefinable quality, which makes her style not only adequate but thrillingly beautiful. The fact that her dialogue is sometimes stilted and unreal is overcome by the beauty of her writing. No other author has given us such hauntingly beautiful scenes as Charlotte. No doubt there are many novelists who have seen the same pictures that she paints, but no one has painted them for us with such power.

Yes, Charlotte Bronte is truly an artist, an artist transformed by her passion and imagination, an imagination described by David Cecil as being filled with a "child's hopeful credulity, a child's eager, unselfconscious responsiveness which gives it a sincerity which is both touching and winning."¹

¹P. 142.

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