

CYNTHIA A. LINDER

*Romantic Imagery  
in the Novels  
of Charlotte Brontë*



ROMANTIC IMAGERY  
IN THE NOVELS OF  
CHARLOTT TË

Cynthia A. Linder



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*July 1977*

C.A.L.

# List of Abbreviations

All references to the text of the Brontë novels, and to Mrs Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, have been taken from the Haworth edition of *The Life and Works of Charlotte Brontë and Her Sisters*, edited by Mrs H. Ward and C. K. Shorter, and published in seven volumes by John Murray, 1920.

References to passages in particular novels are indicated by quoting chapter numbers in roman numerals.

The following abbreviations have also been used, with the page number of the cited author.

Allott: Miriam Allott, *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1974.

BST: *Brontë Society Transactions*.

Gaskell: Mrs E. C. Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, volume VII of the Haworth edition.

Gérin: Dr W. Gérin, *Charlotte Brontë: The Evolution of Genius*, Oxford University Press, 1967. (By permission of the Oxford University Press.)

PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America.

Shorter: C. K. Shorter, *The Brontës and Their Circle*, J. M. Dent, 1914.

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# I The Evolution of Form

Charlotte Brontë's novels present a problem for the critic who is concerned with the study of narrative patterns, as there appears to be only a very superficial similarity between the four novels she wrote for publication, *The Professor*, *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley* and *Villette*. Three are written in an autobiographical form, whilst the fourth, *Shirley*, is a chronicle of society set in historical time, and narrated by the omniscient and present author, who observes and comments on character, action and event. Furthermore, in two of the three novels written in the autobiographical form, there are 'gothicisms' which seem to be extrinsic to the main story. In *Jane Eyre* there is the description of the mysterious third floor at Thornfield, the suspicious behaviour of Grace Poole, screams, and the inexplicable accidents that take place in Rochester's bedroom, while in *Villette*, there is the apparition of a nun who flits through the garden and attic room of the Pensionnat de Demoiselles, but Charlotte Brontë has not made use of the non-rational elements in her third autobiographical novel, *The Professor*. This is the first problem the critic has to solve – is the supernatural material extrinsic or intrinsic to the work as a whole; is it included for the excitement of the reader, in which case it is extrinsic to the main purpose of the novel, or does it advance the plot, explain the character and background? If it does, then it is intrinsic. That this is an important critical point can be seen in a reading of contemporary nineteenth-century criticism, which judges *Shirley* to be inferior to the other two novels, on the grounds that 'It does not so rivet the reader's attention, nor hurry him through all obstacles of improbability, with so keen a sympathy in [its] reality'. (Allott: 163). It is G. H. Lewes who has made this observation, but he is expressing a view held by other critics as well, that the lack of inventiveness in depicting incident is a weakness in *The Professor* and *Shirley*. In fact, on this criterion, *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* are given first place, whilst *Shirley* is given an honourable mention, and *The Professor* is ignored.

To criticise a work because the narrative technique differs from another work by the same author seems to me to be unjustified, unless the author has not fulfilled the claims she has stated, but this can only be established after a study of the author's claims, in this instance presented in Prefaces and correspondence. From a study of the Miriam Allott collection of criticism, it is obvious that the absence of a thorough examination of Charlotte Brontë's own statements on her work has affected the quality of Brontë criticism. However, there is a large quantity of background material available to the critic, contained in the T. J. Wise four-volume collection of

her letters, the Clement Shorter two-volume edition of her letters, and in Mrs E. C. Gaskell's biography. This source material provides information on Charlotte Brontë's correspondence to her friends Ellen Nussey, Mary Taylor and Miss Wooler, to her publisher George Smith, to his reader W. S. Williams, and to the critic G. H. Lewes, and gives the reader a picture of Charlotte Brontë's personality, in presenting her opinions on life, love, family ties, religion and writing. In the course of my study of the individual novels I shall refer to Mrs Gaskell's biography, and to Charlotte's letters to W. S. Williams, indicating the use of autobiographical material, when and where this information is useful for a better understanding of the writer's intentions and successes. For the present I wish only to present, in the form of a dialogue, an exchange of ideas on the 'art' of writing between Charlotte Brontë and G. H. Lewes, because this will clearly demonstrate my contention that Charlotte Brontë shows an awareness of the 'art' of writing, which Lewes does not always recognise. I have chosen Lewes because he is the only contemporary critic with whom Charlotte Brontë corresponded, and who had written reviews on three of her four novels, only omitting to write a review on *The Professor*, which was published posthumously, in 1857. The correspondence began in 1847; after Lewes had read *Jane Eyre* he wrote to her saying how delighted he had been by the quality of this work from an unknown author, but suggested that for future novels she should restrict herself to the depiction of real experience. Charlotte Brontë's reply to Lewes is illuminating in that it is, firstly, a statement of principles on the craft of writing, secondly, it gives some background information as to why *The Professor* was not accepted for publication, and thirdly, it explains the origin of the melodramatic elements in *Jane Eyre*. She states (Gaskell: 343):

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 to their very footprints; I restrained imagination, eschewed romance, repressed excitement; over-bright colouring, 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 he did not feel warranted in accepting it; such a work would not sell. 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.

As Charlotte Brontë was determined to earn her livelihood through her writing, it is not surprising that she took care in her second novel, *Jane Eyre*, to provide her readers with the 'startling incident' and 'thrilling excitement' that *The Professor* seemed to lack. The question remains, was she successful in fusing the 'gothic' elements with the main narrative? Apparently not, as Lewes, in his review of *Jane Eyre*, published in *Fraser's Magazine*, states that (Allott: 85):

There are some defects in it – defects which the excellence of the rest only brings into stronger relief. There is, indeed, too much melodrama and improbability, which smack of the circulating-library, – we allude particularly to the mad wife and all that relates to her, and to the wanderings of Jane when she quits Thornfield; yet even those parts are powerfully executed. But the earlier parts – all those relating to Jane's childhood and her residence at Lowood, with much of the strange love story – are written with remarkable beauty and truth. The characters are few, and drawn with unusual mastery: even those that are but sketched – such as Mr Brocklehurst, Miss Temple, Mrs Fairfax, Rosamund, and Blanche – are sketched with a vividness which betrays the cunning hand: a few strokes, and the figure rises before you. Jane herself is a creation. The delicate handling of this figure alone implies a dramatic genius of no common order. We never lose sight of her plainness; no effort is made to throw romance about her – no extraordinary goodness or cleverness appears to your admiration; but you admire, you love her, – love her for the strong will, honest mind, loving heart, and peculiar but fascinating person.

Lewes comments favourably on Charlotte Brontë's ability in the art of verbal portraiture, but omits any reference to, or discussion of, narrative techniques in *Jane Eyre*. It is known that Charlotte read the review, as shortly after its publication she wrote to Lewes stating that (Gaskell: 351):

I mean to observe your warning about being careful how 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 . . . .

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. 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-moulding characters, giving unthought-of turns to incidents, rejecting carefully elaborated old ideas, and suddenly creating and adopting new ones.

Two years after having written to Lewes about the influences which determined her style of narrative form, Charlotte Brontë published her second novel, *Shirley*, which Lewes reviewed for the *Edinburgh Review*, stating that in his opinion (Allott: 163-4):

*Shirley* is inferior to *Jane Eyre* in several important points. It is not quite so true; and it is not so fascinating. It does not so rivet the reader's attention, nor hurry him through all obstacles of improbability, with so keen a sympathy in its reality. It is even coarser in texture, too, and not unfrequently flippant; while the characters are almost all disagreeable, and exhibit intolerable rudeness of manner. In *Jane Eyre* life was viewed from the standing point of individual experience; in *Shirley* that standing point is frequently abandoned, and the artist paints only a panorama of which she, as well as you, are but spectators. Hence the unity of *Jane Eyre* in spite of its clumsy and improbable contrivances, was great and effective: the fire of one passion fused the discordant materials into one mould. But in *Shirley* all unity, in consequence of defective art, is wanting. There is no passionate link; nor is there any artistic fusion, or intergrowth, by which one part evolves itself from another. Hence its falling-off in interest, coherent movement, and life. The book may be laid down at any chapter, and almost any chapter might be omitted.

That this review hurt Charlotte Brontë is not surprising, nor is it unexpected that in her next novel, *Villette*, she returned to the narrative form of the successful *Jane Eyre*. This is not the place for a discussion of Lewes' point of view, the validity or opaqueness of which will, I hope, be made apparent in my analysis of *Shirley*, in Chapter 4, but it is important to know that Charlotte Brontë wrote to Lewes about this review, taxing him for distinguishing female writers from the *genus* author, believing, quite rightly, that the merit of a novel should be determined exclusively by the evidence

contained within the work itself. (Gaskell: 438-9). *Villette* was published at the end of January 1853, and two weeks later there appeared an unsigned review in the *Leader*, which had, in fact, been written by Lewes; his verdict on *Villette* being that (Allott: 185):

... considered in the light of a novel, it is a less interesting story than even *Shirley*. It wants the unity and progression of interest which made *Jane Eyre* so fascinating; but it is the book of a mind more conscious of its power.

There is no record of Charlotte Brontë being aware who the reviewer was, nor how she judged this article, but that she was concerned about the opinion of critics on her work, the following extract from a letter she wrote to W. S. Williams shows. She states (Gaskell: 605):

Were a review to appear, inspired with treble their animus, *pray* do not withhold it from me. I like to see the satisfactory notices – 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. . . .

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.

The foregoing dialogue between Lewes and Charlotte Brontë has clarified the problem of the changes in structure to be found in her four novels. Charlotte Brontë wrote *Shirley* in that form, because she thought that was what the public wanted, taking Lewes' opinion as a barometer of public taste. But it does not answer the second problem, whether Lewes was correct in his statement that there are defects of unity in *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley* and *Villette*. It is my intention in the following chapters to study each of the novels independently, by tracing the pattern of the narrative through the predominating imagery used in that novel, and to consider whether that imagery, be it artefacts of civilisation, or taken from nature, is an effective means of conveying simultaneously both subjective and objective levels of meaning. Expressing the problem in twentieth-century critical terminology – are the chosen 'objective correlatives' successful in their designated function of presenting states of mind and

feeling, and an appropriate symbolisation of the situation of the character in question, at any particular place in the narrative? Finally, I hope, in the course of my examination, to determine whether the melodramatic elements in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* have been successfully fused into the novel, so that they become an intrinsic part of the structure of that novel. It is only after such a study has been undertaken that one is in a position to comment on the quality of Charlotte Brontë's artistic ability, and my findings, after a close study of each of the novels, will be given in the Conclusion.

## 2 *The Professor*

Charlotte Brontë wrote *The Professor* in the form of an autobiography, using the central character, William Crimsworth, as the narrator of events. The novel begins with a description of his experiences as a young man in England, his adult life in Brussels, and finally, his life of retirement when he returns to England with his wife and son. Variety is given to the linear pattern by dividing the novel into three geographical sections, which correspond to differing stages of Crimsworth's material and emotional development, all of which are held together by a strict chronological order, but from the point of view of an elderly man. Thus, the structure of the novel is a simple and straightforward chronological exposition of events beginning in Chapter II. Chapter I is a rather clumsy presentation of some background information, which could have been omitted, and the facts incorporated in Chapter II, as it is written in the form of a letter to an old school friend named Charles, whom we do not hear of again.

The story proper begins in Chapter II, when William Crimsworth goes to the north of England to stay with his brother and sister-in-law, hoping to be given some employment by his brother, who is a wealthy mill-owner. The brother, Edward Crimsworth, offers him a post as clerk at the factory, but tells William that he is not to expect any marks of favouritism. On the contrary, Edward seems to resent his brother's superior education, as his education at Eton had been paid for by two uncles, and is pointedly rude, even hostile, to William on every occasion that they meet. The work of translating foreign correspondence that William is given to do is extremely dull, and he is not sorry when he is dismissed by Edward on the pretext that he has spread malicious gossip about him around the town. Although William is glad to end this servile work, he is afraid of the future, as he has no money, qualifications, or friends. At this point, an acquaintance, Mr Hunsden, who is, by nature, a very brusque character, suggests to William that he should go abroad and try to earn his livelihood there, and gives him an introduction to a friend living in Brussels. William's decision to go to Brussels concludes the first section of the novel; he is 21 years of age.

The second section begins with William's journey to Brussels, depicts his arrival there, and describes how he obtains a post as a teacher at a boys' school, with the help of Hunsden's letter of introduction. The Brussels section forms the major part of the novel, and in it we are given a picture of William's mental and emotional growth. The reader is given an account of his experiences as a

teacher at the boys' school, which is directed by a M. Pelet, and his infatuation with Mlle Reuter, the directress of a neighbouring girls' school, from which he extricates himself when he learns that she is secretly engaged to M. Pelet, and, finally, his meeting with, falling in love, and marriage to Mlle Henri, who is his pupil. This section ends with a portrayal of his married life. He is now middle-aged, is the successful head of a boys' school, and the father of a boy named Victor. The final section of the novel gives an account of the Crimsworths' return to England, which they are enabled to do through having worked hard, lived frugally, and having saved enough money to live comfortably in their retirement.

It is a story without any excitement, but it is what Charlotte Brontë wanted to write, and she consciously and rigidly controlled the language and situation to present a picture of life in the middling stage of success. The fact that she chose such a prosaic setting of hard endeavour to present the life of her hero may seem strange to the readers of her Angrian stories, where flamboyant characters are constantly shown in exotic countries facing superhuman challenges, but it was her stated aim to control her imagination, and check extravagance in the first novel which she wrote for publication. In the Preface to the novel, Charlotte Brontë states the principle underlying the writing of the novel was 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; that, before he could find so much as an arbour to sit down in, he should master at least half the ascent of 'the Hill of Difficulty'; that he should not even marry a beautiful girl or lady of rank. As Adam's son he should share Adam's doom, and drain throughout life a mixed and moderate cup of enjoyment.

It is a fact that the picture of William's climb up the 'Hill of Difficulty' is a sombre one, painted predominantly in dark colours, in which is depicted his struggle for economic independence and a fulfilled emotional life. The language reflects the mood of the narrator, which is serious and restrained, with few excursions into the poetic or extravagant, and with no exciting incidents to relieve the grey picture of a 'mixed and moderate cup of enjoyment'. Even William's visit to Mlle Henri, when he proposes marriage to her, is described in restrained language, and painted in subdued colouring, as the following extract shows (XXIII):

I came forward, bade Frances 'good evening', and took my seat.

The chair I had chosen was one she had probably just left; it stood by a little table where were her open desk and papers. I know not whether she had fully recognized me at first, but she did so now; and in a voice, soft but quiet, she returned my greeting. I had shown no eagerness; she took her cue from me, and evinced no surprise. We met as we had always met, as master and pupil – nothing more. I proceeded to handle the papers; Frances observant and serviceable, stepped into an inner room, brought a candle, lit it, placed it by me; then drew the curtain over the lattice, and having added a little fresh fuel to the already bright fire, she drew a second chair to the table, and sat down at my right hand, a little removed.

The restraint of the feeling is reflected in the quietness of William's entry into the room, his subdued greeting, and the statement that their relationship was that of master and pupil. The only light in the picture is that of the candle, and the only warmth that given off by the bright fire. This is not a bright illumination of an important episode in William's life, more appropriate, in fact, as an illustration of the domesticity of a long-married couple. Indeed, Charlotte Brontë makes it absolutely clear that the William Crimsworth – Mlle Henri marriage is not to be a flight from reality into a world of sunshine and sensuality, but a partnership in which both persons through their endeavour and perseverance establish for themselves a niche in the prosaic world of labour. It is Mlle Henri's capacity for hard work and self-restraint which attracts William to her, as he says (XIX):

I loved the movement with which she confided her hand to my hand; I loved her as she stood there, penniless and parentless; for a sensualist charmless, for me a treasure – my best object of sympathy on earth, thinking such thoughts as I thought, feeling such feelings as I felt; my ideal of the shrine in which to seal my stores of love; personification of discretion and forethought, of diligence and perseverance, and self-denial and self-control – those guardians, those trusty keepers of the gift I longed to confer on her – the gift of all my affections; model of truth and honour, of independence and conscientiousness – those refiners and sustainers of an honest life; silent possessor of a well of tenderness, of a flame, as genial as still, as pure as quenchless, of natural feeling, natural passion – those sources of refreshment and comfort to the sanctuary of home.

This passage is a fair representation of the general tone of the novel, in which puritanical attitudes are blended with Romantic

method, so that the love portrayed is practical rather than sensual, and it is consistent with the change of style that Charlotte Brontë has chosen, as she relates, in the Preface, that she 'had got over any such taste as I might once have had for ornamented and redundant composition', and it is a fact that there are no implausible occurrences, or improbable characters to assist the hero up the 'Hill of Difficulty'. The only events which do not arise from William's endeavours are those initiated by Mr Hunsden, and they are of a practical nature in keeping with the theme and character portrayal in the novel. Apart from the letter of introduction to a Mr Brown, which has already been noted, Hunsden also sends William the portrait of his mother, which he had bought when Edward's household effects are auctioned due to the latter's failure in business.

Hunsden's presence is necessary in the novel, as he functions as the goad which prods William to act, and his optimism and energy are a foil to William's natural tendency to mental and physical inertia, and, on occasion, to his despondency. The effect of Hunsden on William can be seen in the 'picture' episode, which would seem to be superfluous, unless it were interpreted in the light of evidence obtained from the first passage in which the painting is mentioned. The reference to the painting occurs in the scene in which William describes his first dinner party at his brother's house, when he meets his sister-in-law for the first time. The description of the sister-in-law, with her garish appearance of red hair, bright eyes, and a round face, is contrasted with the picture of William's mother, who has a thoughtful expression, and serious eyes. Although William has no experience of women, his instinctive reaction is one of approval for the type represented by his mother, and distaste for the flamboyancy of his sister-in-law. Nevertheless, when he arrives in Brussels, and meets Mlle Reuter, he is attracted to her, despite the great similarity between Mlle Reuter and his sister-in-law; the attraction to the latter person being her foreign quality and her physicality. This last he finds most disturbing, so much so that even when he knows that she is about to marry M. Pelet he is still excited by her, as he says (XX):

I was no pope – I could not boast infallibility: in short, if I stayed, the probability was that, in three months' time, a practical modern French novel would be in full process of concoction under the roof of the unsuspecting Pelet. Now, modern French novels are not to my taste, either practically or theoretically. Limited as had yet been my experience of life, I had once had the opportunity of contemplating, near at hand, an example of the results produced by a course of interesting and romantic domestic treachery.



As William does not intend to play the part of villain in the Pelet household, he resigns his post, an act which is in keeping with the rôle Charlotte Brontë had envisaged for him. It is at this point that Hunsden appears in his life again. Crimsworth tries to evade Hunsden's more probing questions, as he knows that it is 'not easy to blind Hunsden'. Evidently not, for the morning after this conversation, Hunsden has the picture delivered to William's room, using it as a visual exemplum to remind him of his natural affinity to purity and simplicity, and, by implication, the portrait suggests that Mlle Reuter is the antithesis of this, whereas William would be able to recognise the similarity existing between his mother and Mlle Henri. The picture, then, crystallises what William instinctively knows, but has not allowed himself to acknowledge, that though he may harbour feelings of sensuality, nevertheless his 'road' leads in a different direction. Subsequent to the receipt of this gift, William is goaded into action, he visits Vandenhuten in the hope of getting employment, and, when he has obtained this, he visits Mlle Henri. Thus, the novel shows evidence of the 'art' being more subtle than a superficial reading would indicate, and it shows, furthermore, that Charlotte Brontë was able to 'see' objectively the total character, and to create situations in which aspects of personality are dramatically portrayed.

A particularly interesting example of the adoption of material from Charlotte Brontë's own life to that of her hero's is the transformation of the matter of a letter Charlotte had received from Southey into a statement of Mlle Reuter's to William about Mlle Henri's literary aspirations, and his conduct towards her; she says (XVIII):

... the sentiment of *amour-propre* has a somewhat marked preponderance in her character; celebrity has a tendency to foster this sentiment, and in her it should be rather repressed – she rather needs keeping down than bringing forward; and then I think, Monsieur – is appears to me that ambition, *literary* ambition especially, is not a feeling to be cherished in the mind of a woman: would not Mlle Henri be much safer and happier if taught to believe that in the quiet discharge of social duties consists her real vocation, than if stimulated to aspire after applause and publicity? She may never marry; scanty as are her resources, obscure as are her connections, uncertain as is her health (for I think her consumptive, her mother died of that complaint), it is more than probable she never will: I do not see how she can rise to a position whence such a step would be possible; but even in celibacy it would be better for her to retain the character and habits of a respectable decorous female.