

Brontë's The Professor: An Educational Perspective

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Abstract

Charlotte Brontë wrote The Professor as a result for her stay at Brussels. She tries to immortalize her experience as a student there at a girls' school. And due to the fact that the most part is about schooling and students, I intend to explore this aspect from an experienced teacher's perspective. The paper aims to analyse and address the narrative and focus on the educational elements that Brontë hints at. The outcome of this analysis shows that teachers are human and that they share most of the traits that one encounters in schools. Despite the prestige of their position, teachers tend to act in ways that are dictated by their ideologies, tendencies, and sense of belonging, which they strive to instil in their students.

Keywords: *education, Brontë, England, Language, Belgium, Victorian.*

Introduction

Education is of paramount importance to nations and individuals alike; the progress of nations is measured by the extent of their individuals' knowledge of various sciences. Of course, education takes many forms, including those methods that governments adopt in schools, and employ an ideology to build and nurture individuals in a special way that serves a specific direction and is affected by it. In Brontë's *The Professor* (published in 1957), we will see how education plays an important role in the lives of both the teacher and his students.

Close-reading method is employed to analyze the novel. The result of the analysis shows that the relationship between the teacher and his students may be marred by some undesirable behavior, such as intransigence, cruelty, injustice, etc., and these issues are common among people regardless of their awareness and whatever laws they relate to. And this behavior may happen anywhere and at any time. The impact of such unacknowledged behavior is usually devastating. Although the text to be analyzed relates to the nineteenth century, the lessons can occur at any time and in any country whatever the case may be.

We know that after her stay in Brussels, Charlotte Brontë wrote *The Professor*, and it was published after her death. The plot of the novel was not acceptable to publishers; it follows the story of William Crimsworth as a teacher at an all-girls school in Brussels. Then, he loves his colleague and later, they get married. The novel is known for "its autobiographical" (Sadikova, 2022, p.24) features. At the beginning, the novel is discarded by critics because of its weak beginning and thin plot; it is "unsuccessful in making an impression" (Funtek, 2018, p. 22) on its readers. In my opinion, the novel has not been studied, researched, and analyzed sufficiently; "it's not just romance" (Dohal, 2023, p. 59) as some readers understand it.

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Most of the related studies focus on feminist and gender aspects and research. For example, Ghimire's (2012) thesis uses Marxist feminism in order to address resistance of females to patriarchal norms and values. In turn, Whittington (2004) studies the narrator's relationship with two women and how such relationship affects his awareness. Moreover, the gender roles during the Victorian Era become Abdessatar's (2019) focus. In her thesis, Soares (2015) tries to give insight on how women of that time struggle for their rights. In turn, Sheikh (2018) focuses on religion and gender. Recently, Sakata (2022) studies in her thesis the way characters interact with one another. Recently, in his article, Dohal (2023) traces the colonial elements throughout the novel. Of course, my research here will benefit from these theses, especially since the teacher is male and the students are female, but the focus will be on education.

In another study, Sharma (2007) refers to "class conflict" (P. 8); this issue is of great importance when we know that the teacher has a different nationality and culture. Hence, the novel may portray a "world of inequality and class conflict" (Sharma, 2007, p. 22). In her dissertation, Cooper (2016) explores, "animalism," (p. 14) in the Victorian novel. I will benefit from this work when I analyze some passages where the narrator depicts his students in a "bestial" way. In this article analyzes the novel in question with regard to education.

Furthermore, this article will address what is understood and implied in the text by analyzing behavior and content related to the topic of education. Therefore, when reading the great canonical books, we must make an effort to highlight, enlarge, give voice to, and draw attention to everything that is just passingly present or ideologically reflected in those texts. This research is concerned with studying the educational aspects that we can see in our lives as depicted in Brontë's *The Professor* (TP while quoting, followed by page no.).

Discussion:

In his letter to his friend, the teacher and narrator, Crimsworth flaunts his being "no Oriental" and is proud of his race's "white necks, carmine lips, and cheeks" (TP 10) as signs of intellectuality and wisdom. When a student encounters such a braggart, morale and academic passion will diminish, if not disappear. Indeed, this is the way this narrator introduces himself at the beginning of Brontë's *The Professor*. As readers, we must not ignore the ideology that this person imbibed during his upbringing and education. Such a case can be seen in our daily lives and during our interactions with others as teachers at schools. Moreover, Crimsworth expresses his superiority even when he refers to his friend Hunsden, he emphasizes the idea that his English friend is "a foreigner" (TP 24) because Hunsden's "cultivation is French" (Longmuir, 2009, p. 38). On the recommendations of this friend, Crimsworth travels to Belgium to teach English at an all-girls school.

From the beginning, Crimsworth clearly expresses his hate for the Flemish; he does not like the way they mispronounce English. Becoming a teacher is what provides him with money he needs. Accordingly, he does "go on to the Continent" (TP 46). In the end, accumulating wealth will aid in the process of keeping a specific way of Crimsworth's life. Ultimately, teaching is a job one accepts in order to make living. By accepting the post of a teacher in Belgium, Crimsworth gains some economic independence. Of course, economy is a main pillar of any job. Indeed, Crimsworth "becomes an academic and economic success" (Erickson, 2000, p.34) in a foreign environment.

On the other hand, describing his students as vulgar, violent, and bad influences his performance and their way of educational reaction. By the way, stereotyping individuals of other races is noticeable in the narrative. At the beginning, the narrator finds the French spoken by Frenchmen or Belgians to be "music to [his] ears," yet the Belgian accent

gradually turns out to be “horrors” to him (TP 52). Such behavior might be experienced by any teacher, particularly when the mood is disturbed. Indeed, “Crimsworth has a strong sense of superiority when he talks about the youths of Brabant” (Dohal, 2023, p. 61). You can imagine how this teacher describes in the following way his students whom he teaches:

Their intellectual faculties were generally weak, their animal propensities strong . . . they were dull, but they were also singularly stubborn, heavy as lead and, like lead, most difficult to move . . . having short memories, dense intelligence, feeble reflective powers . . . they would have resisted as obstinately, as clamorously, as desperate swine; and though not brave singly, they were relentless acting en masse. (TP 59)

You do not often encounter such a thorough description of people in a book; “they were dull,” “having short memories,” and “dense intelligence,” and used to resist “as desperate swine.” There is nothing more to say, and these depicted adolescents are inferior to animals if they are compared to them. Teachers usually have their opinions regarding different things that take place in their environment. One may notice their behavior and reaction towards particular events. Yet, Brontë here goes beyond what could be articulated and explores her hero’s conscience. She does not want to embellish reality and manipulate language as much as she is keen to convey the true, realistic picture of what takes place at schools.

In addition, Crimsworth gives himself justification to work in the school and get paid for what he is doing because of their urgent need for him as a teacher of English. He is behaving in a way any other man would comport. His manner is, as Federico (1994) states: “aggressively masculine” crowned with a sense of “superiority” (p. 188). Indeed, any relationship including that of a teacher and students depends on some sort of power. All readers went to schools and they knew the inappropriate behavior they experienced at schools. People usually try to ignore the wrongdoings to let life continue.

Furthermore, Crimsworth paints a very unfavorable picture of the girls in the girls’ school. For him, they are selfish and audacious liars, and they have a low intellectual level (TP Ch. XII). His description in Chapter XII “shows how as an English man Crimsworth sees himself and how he looks at ‘others’” (Dohal, 2023, p. 62). After meeting Juanna Trista, one of his students, he states that “she made noises with her mouth like a horse, she ejected her saliva, she uttered brutal expressions” (TP 91). He continues, “behind and below her were seated a band of very vulgar, inferior-looking Flamandes” (TP 91). Hence, his students are inferior. Indeed, Crimsworth’s description of his class does “inevitably descend to bestial imagery” (Mitchell, 1994, p. 38). In a way, his students are “dehumanized” (Cooper, 2016, p. 160). Well, Crimsworth is one of those individuals who are imbued with a set of instructional beliefs that have distorted and misrepresented for them the way they relate to the real circumstances of their existence. Again, we can find a lot of similar –if not worse–people in our daily lives. At the same time, at any schools, usually there are some miserable and desperate students who should be helped and supported.

The British students, in comparison, are characterized in the novel as being neat, with an upright posture, fluid physique, and white, tapering hands. Additionally, Crimsworth does not hesitate to say that they are “more intellectual than [the Belgians]” with a “modest countenance” and native decency (TP 93); a person often looks out for his race, culture, and language and favors them above others, and Crimsworth does just that. Indeed, any person, whether a teacher or not, will stand by his/her race and dialect; this behavior is what we see in our contemporary world, even if we claim otherwise.

Moreover, though the English protagonist respects and appreciates his French Headmaster, Pelet, for his intelligence, he keeps asserting his own superiority all the time; he criticizes Pelet’s “code of morals” (TP 61), stating his dislike for plain licentiousness. All teachers claim they are teaching values—the ones they believe in. However,

according to the narrator, Pelet's bachelorhood was lived in "proper French style with due disregard to moral restraint" (TP 171). Crimsworth teaches morals and concerns about values according to his way of thinking; everyone evaluates things based on his/her point of view.

In turn, Frances, Crimsworth's girlfriend and schoolmate, believes that Britain is "the most glorious region [she] can conceive" (TP 219) so it becomes "her Promised Land" (TP 230). As a teacher, she will try to instill in her students values she believes in as it is the case with any teacher. Crimsworth frequently reminds readers of the virtues and ideals held by his country. As if he were promoting the ideologies and teachings of his nation rather than just teaching the English language as stated. Language teachers aim to do such a thing because all languages are inseparable from the cultures they represent. Hence, through teaching a language, one may transfer cultures and ideologies.

Furthermore, Hunsden claims to be "a universal patriot," (TP 188). Being "universal" justifies the right of an English subject to teach his culture and language anywhere in this universe; indeed this is what is taking place nowadays and English is taught everywhere. We know that this novel was written in the nineteenth century when Britain used to colonize other countries. One of the main factors that support colonization even in our modern days is using English as a language of communication. English people do not need to learn another language, but other nations should learn English in order to communicate with the masters of technology and economy. It takes its global position under the pretext of being a universal language. But what makes it global other than its people, including our narrator Crimsworth, and the powers that control all the resources in this universe. And we know when you have power, you are the master; you feel superior as it is the case with the hero of the narrative in question. Thus, he obtains a job to teach his global language and assess the meaning of inferiority among his students, as they need his language and its culture. English is taught all over the world; it becomes part of any success. Of course, he is superior in such a situation due to his knowledge, and their lack of knowledge of his language. By the way, such a situation can happen with any teacher; in the classroom, s/he is the one who knows and students do not. Thus, the relationship of power works in such a place (Dohal, 2015, p. 299).

A fundamental feature of powerful nations has always been the management of education. The major theme of *The Professor* revolves around a hierarchically structured educational system in which the colonizers act as the professors and as the dominant masters with knowledge and authority. Even the partially English Frances Henri of the novel is tutored by Crimsworth. When he discusses his encounters with his Belgian students, the entire educational process sounds a lot like "a colonization process" (Dohal, 2023, p.63). Crimsworth examines the personalities of his female students at the beginning, and cautiously plans to manage his class- a plan similar to that of any teacher. He starts out as nice and lenient as a teacher, but once he takes control of his class, he turns into a "despot" at any impertinence or "disobedience." Consequently, there is only "one alternative – submission and acknowledgment of error, or ignominious expulsion" (TP 60).

Education is at the heart of *The Professor*, and since a male teaches females, the power dynamics between the English teacher and the non-English speaking female students could be sexualized –no one can deny the natural tendency of a human character. Of course, feminism may intersect when there is a mere contact between males and females. Indeed, it is a power "relationship between two completely opposite sides: powerful and powerless, strong and weak," dominant and ownerless, "and you may conclude with male and female" (Dohal, 2023, p. 63). Gender is a factor that should not be ignored. In the same sense, Crimsworth of *The Professor* is constructively intended to serve what is superior, i. e. his country. Failure is not among the choices; he emphasizes, "I am successful after all" (TP 145).

Mastering English and its literature signifies an important role in the novel. The “ideology of the mother countries is carried beyond boundaries by languages like English or French, which are finding new foreign mouths to speak them” (Dohal, 2023, p. 63). English as a language and of course the ways of life it expresses and represents become the main concern of the protagonist. Hence, Crimsworth becomes aware of the hostile milieu because of the existence of the ‘others.’ Of course, studying a language like English may require reading its literature. At the time Crimsworth urges Frances to explore and discover English literature, he expresses his distaste of French novels, “either practically or theoretically” (TP 172). In such a way, he values English literature and claims its superiority and belittles, and devalues the French novels due to their content. Though France is a colonial country and plays the same role Britain does, Crimsworth’s role is to assert the priority his nation has in everything including literature.

By the way, the English girls at the school are wretched because they have never tasted the “advantages of settled homes” (TP 93), according to Crimsworth who holds that the mother country is the source of all faultless qualities. Those girls have not receive an “honest Protestant education,” and what they get is just “some scanty instruction, many bad habits” (TP 93). For Crimsworth, they have lost every notion even of the first elements of religion and morals. By emphasizing the superiority of his nation, its education, religion, and values, he blames and criticizes ‘others’ for what they have. Indeed, Crimsworth “shows himself as an intellectually superior and self-controlled person to readers” (Sakata, 2022, p. 50) in the novel. Such behavior may apply to any teacher. Eventually, appearance matters; Crimsworth strives to project the image of a perfect man of his Victorian era. Any teacher at any time should think of the image s/he represents. Indeed, a high grade is given for evaluating a teacher’s behavior and appearance—hence, personality is important.

However, while teaching at a girls’ school, Crimsworth learns “more about the female character, which allows him to construct his male personality by default” (Soares, 2015, p. 61). Any teacher may learn from his students and explore his magnitude. Teachers rarely admit this fact. In the novel, Crimsworth spends a lot of time with Frances in order to guide her literature studies. In doing so, he serves his culture and nation and this is what any teacher looks for during his/her career.

Conclusion:

Well, as teachers, we have to recognize that “texts are fundamentally facts of power” (Ashcroft, 2008, p.23). While reading a book, we may live moments of our daily lives as it is the case with Charlotte Brontë who wrote *The Professor* where education plays the major part of the plot. A lot of what happens in the book is realistic; it depicts a real world we try to avoid and/ or decorate for the sake of continuity. *The Professor's* main character has been placed in Belgium’s multicultural environment to emphasize the powerful primacy of his language and the cultural superiority of Britain over those of France and Belgium as well as over those languages and cultures of other civilizations. His case is present in our time when English becomes the language of education in many fields and communication among peoples, as its speakers have planned for it.

Indeed, “Crimsworth’s class is a microcosm of the external real frustrating world” (Dohal, 2023, p. 65) of ignored and overlooked moments related to education. Stereotyping, classifying students, being biased as a teacher, etc. are among those real moments that researchers avoid on purpose. Yet, in works of arts like the novel in question, these circumstances are flagrantly exposed, and publicly discussed. Although the instructor and pupils in Crimsworth’s class play a crucial role in the interaction, one of them is strong, knowledgeable, and in control while the other is suppressed, largely ignored, and stereotyped. Indeed, such an atmosphere could be noticed, yet overlooked, at any school.

Education consolidates the goals and strategies of governments, and therefore it is guarded and given great care to ensure their ideologies and policies, so that the learner is saturated with that knowledge. Likewise, teachers are products of a particular education, and when they teach, as in Crimsworth's case, they are dedicated to inculcating and reinforcing in the new generation the ideals they have had at school before. This is how governments provide continuity and repeatability of their instructions. In fact, that is what Crimsworth does; he goes to Belgium to instill what he has learned and imbibed in his country to his new learners. In this sense, he serves his country by reproducing and renewing what happened to a previous generation. In most cases, this is the reality of education that researchers avoid addressing because it will highlight what is hidden and clarify what is obscure.

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