

VICTORIAN ATTITUDES TOWARD EDUCATION
AS REFLECTED IN THE NOVELS OF
CHARLOTTE AND ANNE BRONTE

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INTRODUCTION

D. C. Somervell, in English Thought in the Nineteenth Century, made the observation that almost every writer of every age is a reflector, if not a direct exponent, of some phase of thought of his generation. Although it might appear incredible that two daughters of a village clergyman living in a remote hamlet among the Yorkshire hills could in any significant way reflect the attitude of their age toward education, they were, in fact, able to do this.

In the first place, both Charlotte and Anne Bronte attended private schools. When they wrote in their novels about the curriculum and customs at such schools, they were drawing from their own experience, and giving to the reader an authentic picture of private schools of their day. In the capacity of governesses the lives of Charlotte and Anne Bronte had even more contact with the experiences of normal life, and from the observations they made in their letters, diaries, and novels we may gain a revealing picture of Victorian attitudes toward education.

Private schools made a deep impression on both sisters, to a lesser degree on Anne, but to a great and

lasting degree on Charlotte, who was a teacher as well as a pupil in private schools. In Chapter I the writer proposes to give an account of institutions that provided education through private enterprise in the early Victorian Age.

As the positions of the Bronte sisters usually involved the teaching of girls, a study of what constituted a well-rounded education for a girl in Victorian days would provide a background for the main concern of this paper, and will be discussed in Chapter II.

To understand how the Bronte sisters reacted to the experiences they encountered when they went out into the world to make themselves self-supporting, it would be revealing to learn something about the educative influences that shaped and molded their minds, both in their home and at the schools they attended. A study of the educative influences that shaped the Bronte genius will be the subject of Chapter III.

Chapters IV and V will treat of the novels of Charlotte and Anne respectively. In this study reference will be made on occasion to their letters and diaries as well as to their novels, in an effort to determine Victorian attitudes toward education as expressed by these sisters, Charlotte and Anne Bronte.

CHAPTER I

EDUCATION THROUGH PRIVATE ENTERPRISE IN THE VICTORIAN AGE

History demonstrates that some brief periods encompass swifter changes than others. This was essentially true of the age in which the Brontes lived. They were born at the end of the centuries-old domestic system of cloth manufacture, when wool was spun and cloth woven by hand in upland hamlets or isolated cottages in the folds of the Yorkshire hills, and by the time they were full grown the steam age was almost in full swing.

The advent of steam had both an industrial and a social impact. The period of their youth was marked in the West Riding by a great and sudden increase of wealth - by the rise, in fact, of the wealthy manufacturing middle class. G. M. Young, in Portrait of an Age says that between 1815 and 1830 the purchasing capacity of the classes above the wage-earning level was all but doubled.¹ The early Victorian Age was an

¹ G. M. Young, Victorian England: Portrait of an Age (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p.6.

age of production and quickly-amassed fortunes.

With this sudden increase in wealth came a pronounced interest in education, for education was looked upon as the key to enable the newly-risen wealthy class to open the doors to the strata of society in which they were now financially able to move. Great public schools like Rugby were flooded with sons of the new manufacturing class. D. C. Somervell wrote in English Thought in the Nineteenth Century:

The growth of wealth and the development of railway transport were to multiply many times over the fraction of the population that sent its sons to boarding schools. The public schools have been, in fact, one of the principal agents in breaking down the social division between the gentry and the enriched middle class.²

This new thirst for knowledge extended below the manufacturing classes; it was widespread, and was given impetus in various ways. The electric telegraph speeded communication for industry; penny postage gave the poor an inexpensive way to reach distant friends; publications such as the Penny Magazine or the Penny Encyclopaedia aided the spread of information and the desire to acquire reading ability. In When Victoria Began to Reign, Margaret Lambert wrote of this desire

²
D. C. Somervell, English Thought in the Nineteenth Century (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1929), p.113.

for education as 'a universal appetite for instruction which now exists'.

Both church and state had, long before this time, seen the need for education, and had made some attempts to meet that need, principally among the poorer classes. However, in the face of this increased demand, educational facilities in the early Victorian era were sadly inadequate. The truth of the statement made by Manning is evident:

The ideas which guide the schoolroom emerge from the society in which it operates; several generations may elapse, however, before the classroom catches up with the changes in society.³

While the abstract idea of universal education was seeping into the Victorian consciousness, the minds of the Victorians were unsettled about where the responsibility for educating their children lay. Manning wrote:

The Victorians could not make up their minds whether education was a parental, a communal, or a national responsibility.⁴

State intervention and firmly ingrained ideas of laissez-faire clashed; differences between church and chapel seemed insurmountable; the rights of the individual, emphasized by Paine and Godwin and the writers of the

³
John Manning, Dickens on Education (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959), p.3.

⁴
Ibid., p. 14.

Romantic Age, seemed in danger of being undermined if the state were given free rein in the matter of education.

The rapidly changing social order demanded immediate action, and private enterprise stepped into the breach. As a result, a rash of private schools mushroomed over the English countryside, purporting to offer educational advantages for modest or nominal fees. It must be realized that in early Victorian England these private schools were beyond the control of any educational authority. The masters of such schools customarily advertised in the newspapers for pupils, making extravagant claims concerning the delightful comforts of their respective academies, the absurdly large number of subjects taught, and the eminent qualities of the education afforded. In far-away places like Yorkshire such claims for the most part went unchallenged. Writing about these private schools, Manning has this to say:

Some of these were good schools, but far too many were conducted by individuals who desired to eke out a few pennies, or by scoundrels relentlessly driven to avarice towards the exploitation of children.⁵

A very common type of elementary private school was the "dame school", attended by the youngest boys

⁵
Ibid., p. 70.

and girls of the very poor. These schools were a direct result of industrialization, for when both parents were forced to work in mills or factories, care or instruction of children at home became practically impossible. Children were left in charge of a "dame", who sometimes gave rudimentary instruction in the alphabet, the digits, and the Lord's Prayer, and at other times fell asleep over her charges, or went out washing.

There are many references in the works of Dickens to "dame schools". Mrs. Pipchin's establishment in Dombey and Son is particularly authentic, for it had a counterpart in Dickens' own experience. The school he is describing is that of Mrs. Raylance, an elderly lady of reduced means with whom he lodged when he was working in the blacking warehouse. Dickens excoriates such schools in Dombey and Son, and his description of the lady who kept the establishment has, in addition to making the reader laugh, a more important motive, the exposing of the sham of such a school. In these words he describes Mrs. Pipchin:

This celebrated Mrs. Pipchin was a marvellous ill-favoured, ill-conditioned old lady, of a stooping figure, with a mottled face, like bad marble, a hook nose, and a hard grey eye, that looked as if it might have hammered on an anvil without sustaining any injury . . . She was generally spoken of as a great manager of children, and the secret of

her management was to give them everything that they didn't like, and nothing that they did - which was found to sweeten their dispositions very much.⁶

When she became greasy on the outside from her meal of mutton chops and hot rolls, while her pupils were regaled on rice, 'it did not seem to lubricate her at all; for she was as fierce as ever, and the hard grey eyes knew no softening.'⁷

In Bleak House Dickens describes another dame school, that attended by Esther Summerson when she lived with her puritanical aunt, where she was made a victim of the theory of the depravity of children, a theory that was commonly held in early Victorian days.

The Education Commission of 1861 reported that accommodations in the dame schools were so overcrowded that children tumbled over each other like puppies in a kennel.

Any room, however small and close, serves for the purpose; the children sit on the floor, and bring what books they please: whilst the closeness of the room renders fuel superfluous, and even keeps the children quiet by its narcotic effects.⁸

For older children of the poor there was the "common day-school", usually maintained by men, masters

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Charles Dickens, Dombey and Son (London: The Gresham Publishing Co., 1904), p. 78.

7

Ibid., p. 80.

⁸Manning, p.73.

who were in general dissolute, ignorant, and brutal. A Royal Commission of Inquiry, set up under the chairmanship of the Duke of Newcastle in 1858, published a report which carried the following extract describing the teachers of these common day-schools:

None are too old, too poor, too ignorant, too feeble, too sickly, too unqualified in any or every way, to regard themselves, and to be regarded by others, as unfit for school-keeping, if not as simultaneous, at least as preparatory employments. Domestic servants out of place, discharged barmaids, vendors of toys or lollipops, keepers of small eating houses, needlewomen who take in plain or slop work; milliners; consumptive patients in an advanced stage; cripples almost bedridden; persons of at least doubtful temperance; outdoor paupers; men and women of 70 or 80 years of age; persons who spell badly . . . who can hardly write, and who cannot cipher at all.⁹

Another type of private school which catered to many levels of society, depending upon the pretentiousness of its accommodation and the courses of study it could boast, was the private boarding school. The name 'boarding school' instantly calls to mind famous and infamous boarding schools immortalized by Dickens, who, more than any other author, bared conditions in these schools to the public eye, and exposed the "sham" that existed in the name of education. Some schools he condemned for their brutality, as he did in his trenchant portrayal of Dotheboys Hall with its Mr. Squeers, num-

bered among the immortal creations in English fiction. Others he ridiculed for their empty sham, as Picksniff's school for architects in Martin Chuzzlewit. Still others, like Doctor Blimber's establishment in Dombey and Son, he denounced for the system of forcing children in classical pursuits far beyond their years and comprehension. (Later in this paper when the writings of the Brontes are being considered we shall see that Charlotte, too, denounced this system of 'forcing'.) Behind the humor of Dickens is his indictment of a system of education that forced children to memorize facts, endangered the health of frail or nervous children, and debased the true meaning of education.

It is evident that Dickens' teachers are somewhat distorted for the sake of fun, but that they are not merely figments of Dickens' imagination may be proved by consulting the recorded reminiscences of many notable people. Thackeray wrote of his early days at a private school where victuals were scant and canings frequent; Oliver Goldsmith and Hugh Walpole retained to adulthood a vivid recollection of injustices and indignities endured in private schools. Manning insists that the reader should not be too incredulous when he reads Dickens' accounts of the private schools. He agrees that they are displayed dramatically and

theatrically at times, but he has this to say:

But the many letters from people who asserted they went to school to the original Squeers show that any charge that these characters are improbable is false. They lived both in the reality of English life and in the fairyland between the covers of Dickens' novels. Historical accounts of conditions in many of the private schools of England confirm the wretchedness and the squalor, the brutality of the masters, and the inadequacy of the education given.¹⁰

The very wealthy parent often adopted another expedient in providing for the educational needs of his children. He considered it a status symbol to engage a tutor for his sons and a governess for his daughters. Literature abounds in examples of the condescension and snobbish discrimination practised against these hapless creatures who lived, surrounded by opulence and the trappings, at least, of refinement, almost as pariahs of society, lonely, neglected, and humiliated beyond belief. George Eliot in The Mill on the Floss gave us an impression of how unenviable was the lot of the governess. Maggie Tulliver had no love for the dreary situation she was forced to accept to preserve her independence. She hated the unruly pupils, the stigma of the profession, the pitying glances of her friends, and the school diet - watery

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Manning, p. 102.

rice-pudding spiced with Pinnock'.¹¹ Dickens wrote in David Copperfield about the governess Rosa Dartle, victim of an attack by a spoiled, unruly pupil, who bore a disfiguring scar all her life - a scar that left psychological, social, and emotional effects, and changed her from a pleasant young woman to an edged-tool.¹² Nor was this attitude toward governesses confined to England. Dostoyevski writes in Crime and Punishment of the sister of Raskolnikov, Dounia, who was insulted and made to suffer in the employ of the house of Svidrigailov, and then dismissed unfairly and sent home in disgrace.¹³ Thackeray assessed the position of a governess in society with biting sarcasm. Becky Sharp, as an articulated pupil and teacher of French in Vanity Fair, was made to feel her inferior position in Miss Pinkerton's school, but was able to make her way by her audacity, wit, and shrewdness. When "high society" attempted to put her in her place, she talked French loud and fast, and was able to confound and astound her tormentors by a display

11

George Eliot, The Mill on the Floss (London: Collins Press, 1952), p.369.

12

Dickens, David Copperfield, p. 437.

13

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Crime and Punishment (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1956), p.50.

of her brilliant accomplishments. Charlotte and Anne Bronte, young women whose sensibilities were of a finer nature than Becky's, were wounded by their essays as governesses into society, and bore the scars long after. Victorian attitudes toward the governess will be seen in the writings of these two Bronte sisters, which will be examined in a later chapter.

CHAPTER II

THE PECULIAR ROLE OF WOMEN IN VICTORIAN SOCIETY

In 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft, famed in literary chronicles as the wife of William Godwin and the mother of Mary Godwin Shelley, spoke poignantly from her own bitter experiences of the humiliation that intelligent women were made to suffer in a smug and cruel society, In the eighteenth century men were possessed with the naive belief that women existed only to contribute to the pleasure and comfort of man. In A Vindication of the Rights of Women Mary Wollstonecraft wrote of the effect of the doctrines of Rousseau in placing women in this inferior position, referring to Emile, in which Rousseau declared that a woman should be governed by fear to exercise her natural cunning, and made a coquettish slave in order to render herself a more alluring object of desire, a sweeter companion to man whenever he should choose to relax himself. Her writing bristles with indignation, and she spoke out so vehemently against the repression of women that she was derisively called a "hyena in petticoats".

That the nineteenth century's attitude toward women was to a great extent influenced by the

doctrine of Rousseau is abundantly clear in the literature of the age. Several excerpts from Emile will serve to make clear Rousseau's opinion of woman's place in society:

The man should be strong and active; the woman should be weak and passive; the one must have both the power and the will; it is enough that the other should offer little resistance. When this principle is admitted, it follows that woman is specially made for man's delight . . . her strength is in her charms.¹

A woman's education must be planned in relation to man. To be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect, and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of women for all time, and this is what she should be taught while she is young.²

When the Greek women married they disappeared from public life; within the four walls of their home they devoted themselves to the care of their household and family. This is the mode of life prescribed for women alike by nature and reason.³

Habitual restraint produces a docility which a woman requires all her life long, for she will always be in subjection to man's judgments, and she will never be free to set her own opinion above his.⁴

These extracts from Emile and other passages from Rousseau's pen, popularized in England by the

1

Jean Jacques Rousseau, Emile (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1957), p. 322.

2

Ibid., p. 328.

4

3Ibid., p. 330. Ibid., p. 333.

writers of the Romantic Age, were undoubtedly of great influence in relegating women to a subservient position in Victorian society. But to understand and appreciate more fully the peculiar position of women in Victorian England we must add to Rousseau's influence the demands of nineteenth century respectability, and the pressure of an uncompromising religion. The assertion that the whole system seemed bent on the strangulation of personality, of turning a woman into an automaton, is confirmed in Young's Portrait of an Age:

That the education of girls, as codified by eighteenth century manners and moralized by nineteenth-century respectability, tended to a certain repression of personality . . . can hardly be denied.⁵

And he goes on to say that the nineteenth century man liked his women fragile, ignorant, and good.

Viola Klein, in a radio talk on "The Emancipation of Women" said:

The rising middle class put a premium on the idleness of their women. It attached a definite prestige value to it. Apart from rearing children, the social function of the bourgeoisie woman was to be a living testimony to her husband's social status. Accordingly her virtues were chastity and a sense of propriety. They did not include either industry or intelligence. Feminine education conformed to these standards. Girls were not ex-

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G. M. Young, Victorian England: Portrait of an Age (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 90.

pected to be any more than an ornament to society. Not that which would make them good and useful in the community, or even what would give pleasure to the girl herself, but that which would make her admired in society was the "raison d'etre" of a girl's education.⁶

The wives and daughters living in the new provincial towns that grew up around the factories no longer had the work to their hand that had occupied ladies on estates, or women in cottages. They made their idleness a virtue, and the schools to which they were sent did what was expected of them, in providing a smattering of accomplishments with the sole object of enabling them to catch a husband as soon as possible after leaving. These conditions existed at the time of the Brontes, and some years later Ruskin felt the need to complain with indignation that girls were educated as sideboard ornaments and then were chided for their frivolity.

Every girl was prospectively the wife of a gentleman, or workman, or something in between. For the few unmarried there was a small annuity, or dependence as companion, governess, or servant in house or shop. The Victorians saw no need to provide education, as we understand the word today, for their

⁶G. M. Trevelyan et al, Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians (London: Sylvan Press, Ltd., 1950), p. 256.

women. This idea is confirmed in Young:

Education meant a grounding of morals and behavior to last all through life, and a top dressing of accomplishments intended partly to occupy a girl's mind, partly to attract the men, and, in the last resort, to earn a living by if all else failed.⁷

With such goals in mind, it is not surprising that education meted out to girls in early Victorian England hardly merited the appellation. The Taunton Commission, which in 1861 reviewed the whole system of secondary education, reported that among the better classes education of girls was still a domestic industry staffed in the first place by the mother, who might delegate the routine to a governess, and by visiting masters. Those families who could afford an annual stay in London added some intensive teaching by specialists in music, drawing, and the languages. Young writes:

The domestic system involved the employment of untrained gentlewomen as teachers, and the figure of the governess, snubbed, bullied, loving, and usually quite incompetent is a standby of Victorian pathos.⁸

On this subject, the role of women in Victorian society the Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield Univer-

7

Young, p. 91.

8

Ibid.

sity in an address to the Bronte Society said:

We are told in the Report of the 1864 Commission that girls' education was still in a very bad state, and that the teachers, especially in mathematical and scientific subjects, were very ignorant. There was, indeed, in those days a curious superstition which has hardly yet been dispelled, that some subjects were suited to girls' education and that others were not. Mathematics, for example, was not a ladylike subject; and most elaborate psychological causes were given for this - that girls' minds acted through their imagination and boys' through reason - causes which sounded very impressive until it was discovered that the facts on which they were formulated were non-existent. . . . In the same way, chemistry and physics are the sciences for boys' schools, botany is the science for girls'; and the reason alleged is not, I think, the true reason. Chemistry and physics require expensive laboratories and apparatus; botany requires a piece of board, a wild flower and a needle, and, as an extreme resource, a microscope in addition. It is easy to see how the division line came about, in days when parents were more ready to spend money on the education of their sons than of their daughters.⁹

Education for girls was not considered necessary until comparatively modern times, although a scholarly education was secured by a few women who stand out from the crowd as exceptions rather than the rule. Among these might be mentioned Queen Elizabeth I, Jane Austen, Mary Wollstonecraft and her daughter Mary Godwin Shelley, George Eliot, the Bronte girls, and Charlotte's biographer Mrs. Gaskell. That these women

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Sir W. H. Hadow, Education as Treated by the Brontes (Address to Bronte Society, Halifax, 1925), pp. 274-75.

were able to acquire such astonishing intellectual attainments in an age in which women occupied such an inferior position is largely due to the fact that it was their good fortune either to have a well-educated father, an exceptional tutor, or to live among a select group of writers or advanced thinkers. Some women were able to educate themselves in the best way possible - by free rein in a good library. The Brontes, while having few advantages for formal education, profited by reading widely in their youth, and inherited a thirst for knowledge from their educated father. In many of the homes of the 'newly rich' the daughters had no such advantage, for books were so little prized that when some fathers were asked where they kept their books they replied, "In the office, of course"! Books were highly prized in the Bronte household, and there are many references to their love of reading in the diaries and letters extant.

In Dickens on Education Manning writes concerning the education of girls:

In England up to about 1850, the education of girls, such as it was, may be divided into four main divisions. The daughters of noble families were educated privately at home, as ladies, under the care of governesses. The daughters of the well-to-do middle class, the second group in the social scale, would probably attend one of the better private boarding schools for girls. The daughters

of the lower middle class - daughters of families reduced to 'genteel poverty', or of poor clergymen, would more than likely attend one of the semi-charitable boarding-schools for girls, which, because it was partially supported by some benevolent individual, could accept lower fees. Finally, for the fourth group, the very poor, there was no provision at all unless they were able to attend a dame school,¹⁰ a monitorial school, or a charity day-school.

On the subject of the curricula of girls at home and at private schools Manning writes:

The curricula . . . consisted of two parts: elegant accomplishments and a little solid knowledge. The accomplishments took most of the time by far.¹¹

George Eliot castigates the sham that masqueraded for education in her description in Middlemarch of Rosamind Vincy, a typical flower of a Victorian private school, who had excellent taste in the fine art of wearing clothes, and who was fully conscious of the effect. The author writes:

She was admitted to be the flower of Mrs. Lemon's school, the chief school in the country, where the teaching included all that was demanded in the accomplished female - even to extras, such as the getting in and out of a carriage. Mrs. Lemon herself had always held up Miss Vincy as an example: no pupil, she said, exceeded that young lady for mental acquisition and propriety of speech, while her musical execution was quite exceptional.¹²

¹⁰
Manning, p. 104.

¹¹
Ibid.

¹²
George Eliot, Middlemarch (Boston: Dana Estes and Company, n.d.), p. 99.

The aim of education was clearly to prepare girls to ensnare a promising husband by enabling them to acquire polish and grace, proficiency in music and dancing, body carriage, and a smattering of French and Italian - badly pronounced! Manning, quoting from an article entitled "Shelley, Godwin and Their Circle" writes:

The parents of the wealthy, in the name of education, made an attempt to prepare their daughters for the marriage market. But even when attained, the status of a well-to-do married woman in the nineteenth century was far from enviable. The law debarred her from direct political power, considered her a chattel of her husband, permitted her to be treated with violence, and waived any rights she might claim to the custody of children or to the disposal of real estate.¹³

When Charlotte and Anne Bronte went out as governesses and viewed from the side-lines the 'educated' women of the proud society circle, they were shocked by the superficiality of their culture, their lack of academic attainments and their pseudo-refinements. Gordon Roe makes it clear, in his book The Victorian Child, that the Victorians did not stress the academic in the education of girls:

One thing every nice girl . . . had to learn was deportment, whether in the home, in class, at special academies, or at finishing schools where any surviving rough edges were skilfully smoothed from a young lady's behaviour. The carriage of the

¹³ Manning, p. 103.

body and limbs seated or standing or in motion was trained by the backboard (also used as a punishment), by walking with a book balanced on the head, and by other exercises which had the effect of inducing an easy yet dignified poise. One was not supposed to flop or lounge . . . One sat upright, well away from the chair back, and knew how to comport oneself in every social detail. Deportment was at once a grace and a science.¹⁴

Many are the references in the novels of the period to the tortures of the backboard to produce grace and carriage, and the iron neck collar to draw out the neck. Both Charlotte and Anne Bronte wrote of this peculiar Victorian 'refining' device.

Most females who did succeed in acquiring a really substantial education were looked upon in polite society as being decidedly 'different'; they were viewed as objects to be pitied, for their menfolk had obviously failed to provide for them; they must be widows, or wives of ruined gentlemen or ne'er-do-wells. Daughters of unfortunate tradesmen, of poor clerks or parsons who were unable to secure a husband and who were forced to work were looked upon with no little contempt.

The peculiar role of women in Victorian

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F. Gordon Roe, The Victorian Child (London: Phoenix House Ltd., 1959), p. 118.

society seems to suggest that Rousseau was still exerting an influence on modes of thought in England, as the following passage from Emile will show:

The search for abstract and speculative truths, for principles and axioms in science, for all that tends to wide generalizations, is beyond a woman's grasp; their studies should be thoroughly practical. It is their business to apply the principles discovered by men, it is their place to make the observations which lead men to discover those principles. A woman's thoughts, beyond the range of her immediate duties, should be directed to the study of men, or the acquirement of that agreeable learning whose sole end is the formation of taste; for the works of genius are beyond her reach, and she has neither the accuracy nor the attention for success in the exact sciences; as for the physical sciences, to decide the relations between living creatures and the laws of nature is the task of that sex which is more active and enterprising, which sees more things, that sex which is possessed of greater strength and is more accustomed to the exercise of that strength. Woman, weak as she is and limited in her range of observation, perceives and judges the forces at her disposal to supplement her weakness, and those forces are the passions of man.¹⁵

Much of the philosophy of education for women in the Victorian Age is in a seminal form in this extract from Rousseau's pen, with its flaunting disregard for any requirement of substantial academic achievement, its stress on male superiority. Victorian attitudes toward women and toward education were closely

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Rousseau, Emile, p. 349.

allied. Women were able to take their place as man's equal only when society succeeded in breaking the shackles of Victorian attitudes to the education of women.

CHAPTER III

THE EDUCATION OF THE BRONTE CHILDREN

A. Educative Influence of the Home

In the year 1821 the Reverend Patrick Bronte's wife died, leaving to his care six children, five daughters and a son, ranging in ages from eight years to one year. He was confronted with a task to test the fortitude of the ablest father. It was a period in which in nearly every home the mother assumed the education of her daughters until their teens, when they were sent away for a year or two at a boarding school to acquire that 'polish' which, it was thought, could never quite be achieved at home.

Bronte biographers differ in their opinions as to how well Patrick Bronte assumed his responsibility for the education of his children. Sir W. H. Hadow, Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield University, in an address delivered at the annual meeting of the Bronte Society in 1925 said this:

Your chairman has told you tonight about the courage which was one characteristic of the Rev. Patrick Bronte. I have no doubt that he had courage. He was a very firm upholder of the things he believed to be right and great. But I do want to point out that he was

an exceedingly bad father.¹

The speaker then relates how Mr. Bronte, on the death of his wife, completely at a loss to cope with the demands of six young children, sent down to Penzance for his sister-in-law, Miss Elizabeth Branwell. Phyllis Bentley writes:

The change from Penzance, with its mild air, bright blue sea, sub-tropical vegetation of palms, abundant flowers and long warm summers, to the rainy, snowy, cold, grey, wind-swept Haworth was not agreeable to Miss Branwell, who always retained a gloomy view of all things Yorkshire.²

Yet Aunt Branwell came, and for the rest of her life remained at the Haworth parsonage, discharging her Christian and domestic obligations, in spite of the fact that she did not love or understand children.

The speaker above referred to accuses the father of shutting himself up in his study all day, and of letting the six children bring each other up:

I remember - I think it is Emily who gives it - a pathetic picture of these six little children going hand in hand over the moors for a walk, with nobody to look after them; and soon to be

1

Hadow, Address to Bronte Society, p.265-66.

2

Phyllis Bentley, The Brontes (London: Morrison and Gibb Ltd., 1948), pp. 16-17.

deprived even of the mother-care of the eldest daughter, Maria, who died at the age of eleven.³

However, other biographers give a picture of a father who did have concern for the education of his children, and were of the opinion that if his methods failed it was rather through his inability and his error than through his wilful neglect. Mrs. Gaskell, the first and perhaps the greatest of the many biographers of this famous family, who was acquainted with Charlotte for five years, and who had visited the family while Charlotte was living, stated that 'regular lessons were said to their father',⁴ and that Aunt Branwell had taught her nieces sewing and the household arts. She plainly asserts that they were not reared in ignorance:

Books were, indeed, a very common sight in that kitchen; the girls were taught by their father theoretically, and by their aunt practically, that to take an active part in all household work, was, in their position, woman's simple duty; but, in their careful employment of time they found many an off five minutes for reading while watching the cakes, and managed the union of the two kinds of employment better than King Alfred.⁵

³Hadow, Address to Bronte Society, pp. 266 -67.

⁴E. C. Gaskell, The Life of Charlotte Bronte. (2 vols.; New York: Appleton and Co., 1857), I, 52.

⁵Ibid., p. 123.

Mr. Bronte directed his son's education. Branwell, taught by his father in the parlour downstairs, proved to be an exceptional pupil. At eight he possessed a wide vocabulary, had a photographic memory, and so impressed his father with his unusual talent that Mr. Bronte pressed him to Latin and Greek, and nurtured plans to send his son to Oxford or Cambridge.

Miss Gerin, in her book, Branwell Bronte, tries to reconcile Branwell's reputed brilliance as a boy with his failure to achieve success when he grew up. She lays part of the blame to the over-indulgence of the father, the aunt, and the sisters of the only boy, which fed his ego and at the same time weakened his initiative. Miss Crompton felt that because he had no close boyhood friends outside his home his competitive spirit had not been sparked:

The unfortunate boy was never given a proper education . . . He had no chance of mixing with other boys of his class and intelligence, no competitive element in his education, no opportunity for making suitable friends.⁶

Branwell's sisters blamed the eventual failure of his

6

Margaret Crompton, Passionate Search (New York: David McKay Company Inc., 1955), p.17.

life on the over-indulgence of his up-bringing, and the mistaken confidence placed in his moral judgment by his doting elders. His tragic story has been told by Winnifred Gerin and Daphne duMaurier. Laura Hinkley in one succinct sentence gives a picture of Branwell:

Branwell, the only boy, unhappily dowered with too many gifts, fatally fluent, facile, fickle, gleams like a fallen star.⁷

Mr. Bronte, certainly not fully aware of their import at the time, was responsible for two acts which were to have a great formative influence on his children. The first of these was the use of a mask at question time. In a letter to Mrs. Gaskell Mr. Bronte told how this idea was conceived:

When my children were very young, when, as far as I can remember the oldest was about ten years of age, and the youngest was about four, thinking they knew more than I had yet discovered, in order to make them speak with less timidity, I deemed that if they were put under a sort of cover I might gain my end; and happening to have a mask in the house, I told them all to stand and speak boldly from under cover of the mask.⁸

All the biographers I have read considered this an extremely important happening in the children's

⁷Laura L. Hinkley, Charlotte and Emily (New York: Hastings House, 1945), p.4.

⁸Gaskell, I, p. 49.

lives. Miss duMaurier writes:

When the Reverend Patrick Bronte, wishing to know more about the minds of his six motherless children than he had hitherto discovered, placed each one behind a mask to make them speak with less timidity than before, he gave to the three sisters who survived the first blessed thrill of anonymity. To speak aloud and yet remain, as it would seem, unknown, to hide behind a hollow face, -criticism, mockery, reproof, these things could not touch the wearer of the mask.⁹

This sense of anonymity first experienced in childhood was to have a profound effect on the four Bronte children who reached adulthood. Charlotte, Emily, and Anne hid behind pseudonyms of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell when they were emerging as fledgling authors. Anonymity was the cloak, the safeguard that masked the three sisters from the deriding, suspicious world. It might truly be said that for his whole life Branwell never succeeded in taking off this mask; he could not separate his make-believe world from the world of flesh and blood. Biographers have quite freely conceded that the mask which Mr. Bronte seized upon in a rather playful moment had a decidedly formative influence on his children.

A second influence which had far-reaching

9

Daphne duMaurier, The Infernal World of Branwell Bronte (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961), p. 22.

effects was also provided by Mr. Bronte. It was in the form of a box of twelve toy soldiers brought home as a gift to Branwell. With the twelve small painted figures as inspiration, an extraordinary game involving a secret kingdom was invented. It was, to all intents and purposes, another world, an escapist world, an imaginary kingdom in Africa which together they invented. Fanny Ratchford writes of the incident:

On the night of June 5, 1826, a year after Maria and Elizabeth died, the Reverend Patrick Bronte, returning from Leeds, placed beside the bed of his nine-year-old Branwell a box of wooden soldiers requested by the lad to supplement older sets now battered and broken . . . Early next morning Branwell was at his sisters' door, calling them to see his new soldiers . . . Snatching up one of the soldiers, the tallest and handsomest of the lot, Charlotte exclaimed, "This is the Duke of Wellington! This shall be the Duke!"¹⁰

In these wooden soldiers the children had at hand 'dramatis personae' for an ever-lengthening series of games. Around the toys raged battles and campaigns with Wellington and Napoleon as protagonists. Branwell, who had inherited his father's love for military manoeuvres, directed the armies, until the children, tiring of this game, turned the

¹⁰Fannie E. Ratchford, The Brontes' Web of Childhood (New York: Russell and Russell Inc., 1941), p. 6.

Young Men, each invested with a personality that was to last long after the toy soldiers themselves had disappeared, into characters of a complex fantasy society, the "Angria" of Charlotte and Branwell, the "Gondal" of Emily and Anne.

Much has been written about this imaginary world into which the Bronte children could go and shut out the drabness of reality. That it fired their imagination and provided the spark that grew into a flame of creativity is undoubtedly not an over-statement. It was most certainly the greatest formative influence of their childhood, as recent biographers such as Winnifred Gerin, Daphne duMaurier, Margaret Lane, and Phyllis Bentley affirm. However, its effects were, at the same time, both salutary and deleterious. Miss Bentley writes:

It is clear that the daydream-script habit was an essential part of the Bronte mentality and exerted a strongly formative influence on their work . . . the mere writing of these thousands upon thousands of words, the mere experimenting in so many diverse meters, the mere drawing of so many different characters, gave the Brontes an amount of literary practice which made them experienced writers before they began to compose a line with a view to publication. The small physical space into which this writing was crammed and the tiny delicate print of which it consisted, too, undoubtedly influenced the Brontes' composition. When one is writing tiny letters on a tiny sheet one thinks quite a while before one writes, for a wrong word means an erasure or

correction, very uncomfortable in such cramped quarters. The Brontes' fine English depends very largely on their admirable choice of words. Their daydream scripts gave them a long and strict training in word selection.¹¹

Thus Miss Bentley points out that their daydream world was beneficial. Miss Lane shows that its effects were also deleterious:

To sensitive natures dismayed by life - it seems that the four of them were all, for different reasons so dismayed - there is great comfort and a great danger in the possession of an absorbing daydream in which to hide one's head.¹²

Freud, the eminent psychologist, attached great significance to the fantasy world, but sounded a warning against over-indulgence in fantasy, for he had witnessed the inaction resultant on excessive pre-occupation with the world of imagination, and had seen it lead to paralysing refusals to life.

Although their fantasy play was clearly a forcing ground for their creative imagination, Charlotte in maturity recognized the danger of the dream world and consciously broke from it, though not without anguish.

11

Phyllis Bentley, The Brontes (London: Morrison and Gibb Ltd., 1948), pp. 25-26.

12

Margaret Lane, The Bronte Story (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1953), p.65.

Religious doctrines to which they were exposed in their home had a great influence on the Bronte children. Up to the time of the mother's death they had encountered nothing disturbing in religion. The older girls knew the Bible stories and told them to the younger children, taught them their prayers, and sang the hymns about God's love. They placed emphasis on the lovely and comforting aspects of the Christian story. All was changed when Aunt Branwell came. She was a product of the great Wesleyan revival that had swept Cornwall in her youth. She would save the souls of these wilful children at all cost. At her knee they first heard the Calvinistic doctrine of the "elect", the doubtful prospect of salvation, and the terrifying prospect of eternal damnation. Although Mr. Bronte's doctrines were less rigorous than Aunt's, she had the opportunity, while he was meditating or writing poetry in the front parlour, to inculcate the stern doctrines that were to prey on the minds of the Bronte children into adulthood. Miss Gerin writes:

Aunt Branwell's theories of education and principles of religion, applied to such exceptionally imaginative children as the little Brontes went very far, in the case of Anne

particularly, to breaking the fragile vessel she so earnestly sought to fill with Grace abounding. The place of "home education" to a Wesleyan cannot be overestimated. The formation of character, as distinct from the acquisition of knowledge (which Wesley himself, and Miss Branwell after him, almost despised) was the be-all and edd-all of moral instruction. Wesley's doctrine was "Whatever pain it costs, break the will, if you would not damn the child". She did not use the rod. Her weapon was a tyranny of spirit, exercising her dominion by a strong appeal to the emotions. With these imaginative children she had an easy victory when they were young.¹³

Corruption of the flesh and need of readiness for death were subjects dear to Aunt's heart. To these children, who had seen their dear sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, in their coffins, Aunt's lectures must have been harrowing, and her Methodist Magazine, forty-eight pages monthly, filled with stories of death-bed conversions, extraordinary instances of Divine intervention, and reeking with hellfire and brimstone must have had an influence in forcing them to the joys of the world of imagination in order to escape such stark reality.

Mr. Bronte took delight in discussing with his children the events of the outside world. In Volume II of their childhood story Tales of the

Islanders Charlotte describes the arrival of the Sunday paper ... papa tearing off the cover while the children cluster around him in breathless anxiety ... papa disclosing to the eager ears the events of the week, expounding and explaining very ably ... Aunt and the children avid listeners. Mrs. Gaskell writes:

They took a vivid interest in the public characters, and the local and foreign politics discussed in the newspapers. Long before Maria Bronte died, at the age of eleven, her father used to say he could converse with her on any of the leading topics of the day with as much freedom and pleasure as with any grown-up person.¹⁴

Miss Gerin writes that Maria was an educated child to a degree that many adult women of her day never attained. At six she could correct the proofs of her father's poems; at seven and a half she read regularly the Tory dailies and periodicals, gave her brother and sisters an abstract of their contents and then discussed them with her father. Mr. Bronte told Mrs. Gaskell that he could converse with her on any of the leading topics of the day as with any grown-up person.

When Charlotte was thirteen years old she

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Gaskell, I, p. 50.

wrote in her diary:

Papa and Branwell are gone (to Keighley) for the newspaper, the Leeds Intelligencer, a most excellent Tory newspaper . . . We take two and see three newspapers a week. We take the Leeds Intelligencer, Tory, and the Leeds Mercury, Whig . . . We see the John Bull; it is high Tory, very violent. Mr. Driver lends us it, as likewise Blackwood's Magazine, the most able periodical there is.¹⁵

This account written by a girl of thirteen proves them to be children whose intellects were hungry for stimulation, and it indicates that they were indeed fortunate in having a father and an aunt who were vitally interested in the political and historical events of the time. Although it is difficult to conceive of a more lonely or secluded locale than a village at the edge of the Yorkshire moors, these children were aware of, and intensely interested in, what was taking place in the outside world. To illustrate how topical subjects whetted the imagination of the little Brontes, we have only to note their choice of the continent of Africa as the scene of their imaginary plays. Mungo Park's explorations of the Niger,

15

Ruth H. Blackburn, The Bronte Sisters : Selected Source Material for College Research Papers (Boston: D. C. Heath and Co., 1964), p.12.

had brought Africa to the forefront of the news of the day. The glorious days of Wellington were past, but Mr. Bronte delighted in discussing the Napoleonic Wars with his children. The names chosen for the characters in their imaginary world, Wellington, Napoleon, Ross, Parry, show how their imaginations were effected by the drama taking place in the world outside their Yorkshire village.

In addition to these periodicals, other reading material was available. There are numerous references in their childhood writings of 'papa buying them a book.' They had access to two fine libraries, that of the Keighley Mechanics' Institute, and the personal collection of the Heaton family at Ponden Hall. Thus we can be sure that their creative imaginations were stimulated by a wealth of reading material.

In discussing the educative forces that had a part in shaping the Bronte genius one must not forget the effect of nature, particularly on Emily and Anne. In the great outdoors, as well as in their fantasy world, they could gain freedom from the spiritual dominion of Aunt Branwell. Miss Gerin lays great emphasis on nature as an important factor

in their development:

With the life on the moors Emily and Anne became so deeply impregnate that it shaped their thoughts, coloured their imagination, and quickened their feelings as no other influence in their lives would ever do.¹⁶

Nature was the force that saved the gentle Anne from destruction by self-condemnation, to which all the Bronte children were prone as a result of Aunt's religious training . Behind the smiling face of nature Anne saw a God of love, very different from the vindictive God of Aunt's early teachings. In Anne's novels we see the lonely, distraught heroine time and again turning to nature for solace.

Aunt Branwell's sense of method and ordered procedure made a lasting impression on the Bronte children. The girls in their positions as governesses deplored in their charges the lack of orderliness and planned procedure, which, thanks to Aunt's teaching, was second nature to themselves. That they were more punctual, tidy, and diligent than other young women of their age and time was due to her rigid training.

It will be seen by the foregoing examples

16

Winnifred Gerin, Anne Bronte (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1959), p. 60.

that the home in which the Bronte children were brought up exerted educative influences that set these young people apart from the average child of their age, so that it was difficult for them as governesses to cope with children brought up by such vastly different standards.

B. Formal Schooling of the Brontes

The time soon came when the education of six young children became a pressing problem, and to Mr. Bronte it must have seemed as an answer to a prayer that he heard of the Clergy Daughters' School, recently established at Cowan Bridge not far from Haworth.

The school was accessible from Haworth, and extremely cheap, having been founded expressly for the daughters of poor clergymen; and Mr. Bronte no doubt considered himself fortunate in finding a well-conducted school for his girls which, being partly a charity foundation, was within his means.¹⁷

Although Dickens gibbited the church and charity schools in many of his writings, education through church and charity, admittedly imperfect, was to be preferred to many private schools, for

church schools were controlled and supervised either by the clergy or educated public-spirited citizens. Private schools at that time had neither financial help nor supervision, and they were good or bad depending upon the integrity of the individual who operated the establishment.

In January 1824 it was decided to send Maria and Elizabeth, and later Charlotte and Emily, to this school for the daughters of poor clergymen, operated under the patronage of the Rev. William Carus Wilson. Miss duMaurier says:

Perhaps it was their aunt who first suggested school; school discipline would straighten the rounded shoulders, taughten the poked-in backs, make headway even withthe clumsy fingers that could not, or would not, hold needle and thread to her satisfaction. Measles and whooping cough which had kept the children in bed for weeks must have proved the final straw, with the endless meals on trays.¹⁸

On July 21, 1824, Mr. Bronte took Maria and Elixabeth to their new school, and returned home apparently feeling that they were in good hands. Miss Gerin writes:

Mr. Bronte, in taking his little girls to school, would have seen as much of the institution as its

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Daphne duMaurier, The Infernal World of Branwell Bronte (New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1961), p.28.

directors chose to show, and nothing that his own observation registered could in any way prejudice him against the place. It was a new school claiming to provide a first class education for girls, and warmly recommended by his clerical friends. Recalling his own eager appetite for learning as a child, Mr. Bronte can have but rejoiced that his little girls would be given every opportunity for an education that would not only furnish their minds but fit them for earning their living thereafter. This was to have been the great contribution of the Clergy Daughters' School.¹⁹

On August 10, 1824, Mr. Bronte returned to the school to enrol Charlotte, and Emily was entered Nov. 26 of the same year. The Shakespeare Head Bronte has in its collection of writings on the Cowan Bridge controversy a letter from a teacher, (A.H.), who was at Cowan Bridge during the time of the residence there of the little Brontes. It reads in part:

During both these visits Mr. Bronte lodged at the school, sat at the same table with the children, saw the whole routine of the establishment, and, so far as I have ever known, was satisfied with everything that came under his observation.²⁰

This letter is interesting in the light of subsequent events, for Mr. Bronte has been criticized by some for not troubling himself to find out about the institution to which he was entrusting his chil-

¹⁹ Gerin, Anne Bronte, p. 9.

²⁰ T. J. Wise, J. A. Symington (ed.), The Shakespeare Head Bronte: The Life and Letters (4 vols.; Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1932), I, 74.

dren. It would seem from these accounts that his action was in no way reprehensible.

The grim details of what the children endured that winter at school are graphically told by Mrs. Gaskell, and we can read them in Charlotte's words in her description of Lowood School in Jane Eyre. The sufferings were not only physical, but of mind and soul as well. Mrs Gaskell writes:

Mr. Wilson seems to have had the unlucky gift of irritating even those to whom he meant kindly, and for whom he was making perpetual sacrifices of time and money, by never showing any respect for their independence of opinion and action. He had too, so little knowledge of human nature as to imagine that, by constantly reminding the girls of their dependent position, and the fact that they were receiving their education from the charity of others, he could make them lowly and humble.²¹

Wild, strong hearts, and powerful minds, were hidden under an enforced propriety and regularity of demeanour and expression, just as their faces had been concealed by their father, under his stiff, unchanging mask.²²

In the first prospectus of the Clergy Daughters' School, one of which is preserved at the Bronte Museum at Haworth, is a list of staff members. In addition to being interesting because it indicates

²¹Gaskell, I, p. 64.

²²
Ibid., I, p. 65.

that Cowan Bridge was a family concern, providing salaries for male and female Wilsons, it is illuminating on account of the last position listed, namely:

Singing and Scourgemistress²³

A child was not to be spoiled for lack of the rod! The doctrine of the utter depravity of human nature, and the need for the chastisement of the flesh was dear to the heart of the Victorian educator.

In the spring of 1825 Maria became so ill that Mr. Bronte was sent for. She died at Haworth parsonage in May. In June Elizabeth developed the same symptoms, which were consumptive, and she was sent home to die. Charlotte and Emily were removed from the school.

This abortive first attempt at formal education outside the home ended for Charlotte after a period of less than ten months. That it contributed anything substantial to her development academically is doubtful; that it did contribute, after many years, to the great wave of indignation being rolled up by many writers against the crimes being perpetrated in the name of Victorian education is very certain.

Then followed the five and a half years during which the four remaining Bronte children

were at home together, fabricating their fantasy world, and writing prodigiously as the "Four Chief Geniuses", Tallii, Brannii, Emmii, and Annii. In The Bronte Web of Childhood Miss Ratchford tells of this fruitful period.

The second attempt at schooling outside the home began for Charlotte in January 1831, when she enrolled at Roe Head School. This establishment, about twenty miles from Haworth, was a cheerful, roomy country house run by the Wooler sisters, and accommodating about ten pupils.

Charlotte alone was given this second chance of systematic education at this time. The cost of sending her to boarding school was probably defrayed by an old family friend from a former parish, who had married a vicar and had, besides, a small fortune of her own. Charlotte, although miserable at the idea of leaving home and oppressed by the ordeal of meeting strangers, was eager to take the opportunity for education. Knowledge was what she wanted. Knowledge must be acquired at all costs.

Miss Lane writes:

The Brontes' passionate respect for education is one of their most purely Celtic traits; to the children, no less than to their father, it appeared always as the prize which must be won

at all costs, resolution supplying the means which poverty denied.²³

Charlotte spent eighteen happy months at Miss Wooler's school. Miss Wooler and her sister were refined and educated women; the school was small, and its family atmosphere was homelike. Charlotte set herself with determination to the serious business for training herself to be a governess. She was well aware that her father's two hundred pounds a year was not enough to keep his children in idleness, and Charlotte saw that for herself and her sisters there was only one profession open to them without forfeiting their gentility, that of governess.

Miss Margaret Wooler exerted a profound influence on Charlotte. She was a teacher endowed with great enthusiasm as well as considerable talent; she recognized ability and inspired affection. Mrs. Gaskell, aware of the esteem Charlotte felt for Miss Margaret Wooler, wrote of her:

She had a remarkable knack of making them feel interested in whatever they had to learn. They ~~set~~ to their studies, not as tasks or duties to be got through, but with a healthy desire

and thirst for knowledge, of which she had managed to make them perceive the relishing savour. They did not leave off reading and learning as soon as the compulsory pressure of school was taken away. They had been taught to think, to analyze, to reject, to appreciate. Charlotte Bronte was happy in the choice made for her of the second school to which she was sent.²⁴

A comment made by G. M. Young in Victorian England: Portrait of an Age has relevance here:

The silliness and shallowness of the boarding school is a constant topic of Victorian satire, but they were of all degrees. Browning's aunts had an admirable establishment at Blackheath, and George Eliot was excellently taught at her Coventry boarding school.²⁵

Charlotte's, and later Anne's, happy experiences at Miss Wooler's school is further proof that all private boarding schools were not reprehensible. What does become clear is that whether the school was bad or good seemed to focus on the personality of the teacher - an observation that could be made in our own day.

In addition to definite academic attainments at Roe Head, Charlotte's life was enriched by two lasting friendships which began there, where she met Ellen Nussey and Mary Taylor. They were a strangely assorted trio, but their devotion to each other was

²⁴Gaskell, I, pp. 93-94.

²⁵Young, p. 90.

life-long.

After Charlotte's return home in July 1832 she gave instruction to her sisters. Mr. Bronte provided the services of a drawing master, and all four children experienced the joy of expressing their powerful imaginations in visible forms.

In 1835 Charlotte returned to Roe Head as a teacher, taking Emily as a pupil, and when Emily became unendurably homesick, taking Anne in her place. This was Anne's first and only opportunity for formal schooling, and she was then sixteen years old. She was an avid student. When it came time for her to earn her living she could offer the essential accomplishments, music, singing, drawing, as well as French, Latin, German, English, history, arithmetic and geography. Anne could teach Latin, which Charlotte could not do; she had shared Branwell's Latin lessons with their father. Her training at Roe Head, and at Dewsbury Moor where Miss Wooler's school was later located, was something more than a time of preparation for a post as governess; it tempered her character to a capacity for endurance which to a rare degree she would exercise throughout her life.

After all three sisters had tried governess-

ing, and were wretchedly unhappy at their posts, Charlotte conceived a plan designed to make them happy, yet independent. The idea was for the three sisters to set up their own school. Miss Wooler offered the premises at Dewsbury Moor for the undertaking. Optimism among the sisters ran high.

Then Charlotte, the only practical one of the three, saw the weakness of this plan and promptly formulated another. In September 1841, while she was a governess to the Whites at Rawdon, she wrote to Aunt Branwell:

My friends recommend me, if I desire to secure permanent success, to delay commencing the school for six months longer, and by all means to contrive . . . to spend the intervening time on the continent. They say schools in England are so numerous, competition so great, that without some such step toward attaining superiority, we shall probably have a very hard struggle, and may fail in the end.²⁶

Then she asks permission to use the money, which Aunt had promised for the setting up of the school, for tuition at a school in Brussels.

Consent was given, and in February 1842 Mr. Bronte accompanied Charlotte and Emily to Brussels and saw his daughters enrolled in the school where they remained as pupils until Aunt's death in

²⁶Gaskell, I, p. 192.

November. Mrs. Gaskell writes of the sisters in Madame Heger's pensionnat:

They wanted learning. They came for learning. They would learn. When they had a distinct purpose to be achieved in intercourse with their fellows, they forgot themselves; at all other times they were miserably shy.²⁷

After their unhappy experiences as governesses it was a joy to both girls to submit to authority rather than to exercise it. However, they did not like their fellow pupils, and no doubt quite openly showed it. Their response to nearly everything they saw was a censorious insular hostility. Miss Lane writes:

Mary Taylor in her letters home was expressing the same provincial antipathy to the foreigner, so that one cannot resist the impression that Yorkshire narrowness, strongly reinforced the already painful reserve of Charlotte and Emily; nor can one feel surprised that they were not popular.²⁸

They had neither the tolerance nor good manners to live in harmony with all the Roman Catholics around them. They set themselves apart from the others by their hostility to a faith that was not their own; they were always on the watch for duplicity and hypocrisy, and often expressed opinions that served

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Gaskell, I, p.200.

²⁸
Lane, p. 146.

no useful purpose and would have been better left unsaid. The Shakespeare Head Bronte gives this revealing picture:

It was their first experience of foreign travel, and it came too late in life for them to enter into it with that breadth of mind and tolerance of the customs of other lands, lacking which the Englishman abroad is always an offence. Charlotte and Emily hated the country and people. They had been brought up ultra-Protestants. Their father was an Ulster man, and his one venture into the polemics of his age was to attack the proposals for Catholic emancipation. With this inheritance of intolerance, how could Charlotte and Emily face with kindness the Romanism they saw around them. How heartily Charlotte disapproved of it many a picture in Villette has made plain to us.²⁹

Emily worked like a Trojan, and Charlotte experienced the thrill of being stimulated by working under a first-class teacher, for M. Heger, her French teacher, was indeed a teacher of genius. After the summer vacation Charlotte was appointed teacher of English, and struggled with the impossible task of keeping order in a classroom of unruly Belgian girls, which she describes so vividly in her novel Villette.

After Aunt Branwell's death Charlotte returned alone to Belgium in January 1843, in the capacity of pupil-teacher. It was at this period that she was much

29

Shakespeare Head Bronte, I, p. 254.

depressed by her apparent estrangement from the Hegers. All Bronte writers have dwelt at some length on this phase of Charlotte's life. Mrs. Gaskell considered Charlotte to have given offence, especially to Madame Heger who was a devotee to her religion, by the open contempt she showed for every aspect of Romanism. Miss Lane attributed Madame's coldness to the English pupil's too spontaneous, too emotional response to the professor. There was an unconscious and unexpressed jealousy between the two women.

This second sojourn in the Belgian capital was a mentally disturbing time for Charlotte, and it was a relief to be called home. How friendless and alone she felt can be gauged by a note she entered in her Atlas:

Brussels, Saturday morning, Oct. 14th 1843.
 First Class. I am very cold - there is no fire - I wish I were at home with Papa - Branwell - Emily - Anne & Tabby - I am tired of being among foreigners - it is a dreary life - especially as there is only one person in this house worthy of being liked - also another, who seems a rosy sugar plum but I know her to be coloured chalk.³⁰

And so Charlotte - herself the foreigner - left the foreigners and returned to her beloved Yorkshire,

thus ending the formal schooling of the Bronte sisters.

It is interesting to try to assess the benefits accrued from these periods at boarding schools. At least some system was brought into their haphazard method of getting an education; they had gained valuable experience in making their way in the world - at least Charlotte and Anne profited in this respect; the world outside only served to make the third sister draw more closely into her own more real internal world. Their schools helped Charlotte and Anne to add to their accomplishments, and made it possible for them to go out as governesses and so gain the experiences that became the background for their novels; for Emily the Brussels experiment gave her the disciplines that sparked her genius that produced Wuthering Heights.

The main purpose of going to Brussels has been given in the words of Charlotte's letter to Aunt Branwell. By a strange quirk of fate, after the sisters endured so much for a particular purpose, that of setting up their own school, the plan never came to fruition. However, for the purpose of this paper the sojourn in Brussels has great significance. It gives an insight into continental methods of education, gives a vivid description of the un-

inhibited cosmopolitan pupils as contrasted with the narrow insularity of the English girls. This will be discussed more fully when the novels of Charlotte are examined in the following chapter.

CHAPTER IV

VICTORIAN ATTITUDES TOWARD EDUCATION AS REFLECTED IN THE NOVELS OF CHARLOTTE BRONTE

Charlotte's most popular novel, and the one for which she won immediate acclaim on its publication in September 1847, was Jane Eyre. From this book we can gain many insights into Victorian attitudes toward education.

Early in this story the penniless orphan, Jane Eyre, disliked and abused by her aunt, Mrs. Reed, is summoned one morning to the richly ornate drawing room to stand before the stony Mr. Brocklehurst, headmaster of the school to which she is to be sent. The meeting is not a propitious one for Jane; her aunt represents her as a wilful, deceitful child:

I should be glad if . . . the teachers were requested to keep a strict eye on her, and above all, to guard against her worst fault, a tendency to deceit . . . I should wish her to be brought up in a manner suiting her prospects, to be made useful, to be kept humble.¹

Mr. Brocklehurst's rejoinder, with its cant phrases and pompous religiosity, shows an attitude

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Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre (New York: Washington Square Press, 1962), p. 33.

common among Victorian educators:

Humility is a Christian grace and one particularly appropriate to the pupils of Lowood . . . I have studied how best to mortify in them the worldly sentiment of pride.²

The master felt that it was imperative to keep his charity pupils humble, and to remind them constantly of their lowly station in life. Class distinction was so rife in Victorian England that it approached a caste system. One dared not aspire to rise above the station in which fate placed him; it was not proper or fitting. The Victorian educator in the charity schools felt it his Christian duty to infuse a spirit of humility in his charges. Lady Bowley in Dickens' The Chimes had her charity pupils chant as they worked:

Oh let us love our occupations,
Bless the Squire and his relations,
Live upon our daily rations,
And always know our proper stations.

One has only to recall with revulsion the result of this detestable cant of false humility in the person of the 'umble Uriah Heep in David Copperfield.

Mr. Brocklehurst felt he had a divine command to make the girls humble:

I have a Master to serve whose kingdom is not

²

Ibid.

of this world; my mission is to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh.³

And he went about his chastening work with all the zeal of a sadist. The clothes the girls wore were unnecessarily ugly, scratchy, and uncomfortable; the curls were an abomination to Mr. Brocklehurst. He says to one of the teachers on his staff:

You are aware that my plan in bringing up these girls is not to accustom them to habits of luxury and indulgence, but to render them hardy, patient, self-denying.⁴

That Mr. Carus Wilson, the Victorian educator who was the flesh-and-blood counterpart of the fictional Mr. Brocklehurst, actually did hold those views is supported by Bronte biographers:

The Reverend Carus Wilson conceived that the basic precept to be instilled in the young was a scorn of their vile mortal substance; they must never give it a thought. He therefore, with no deviations, constrained them to practise the most absolute asceticism. How else could their souls be saved?⁵

Of the Victorian obsession to instill

³Ibid., p. 68.

⁴Ibid., p. 66.

⁵Emilie and Georges Romieu, *Three Virgins of Haworth*: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1930), p.24.

humility Manning says:

The attitude of servility that the charity schools pounded into girls from the lower ranks of society is well caught in Mrs. Gaskell's Wives and Daughters, where charity uniforms with white caps and checked aprons must be worn, and obsequious curtsies and humble 'please ma'ams' are rigidly demanded of Molly Gibson.⁶

When the kind teacher, Miss Temple, invoked Mr. Brocklehurst's wrath by ordering cheese and bread for the pupils who could not eat the burnt porridge served them for breakfast, he stormed:

Oh, madam, when you put bread and cheese, instead of burnt porridge, into these children's mouths, you may feed their vile bodies, but you little think how you starve their immortal souls.⁷

Charlotte's description of the first morning at Lowood school gives an insight into one aspect of Victorian education - its heavy accent on religious training. She writes of the memorizing of the Collect of the day and certain texts of scripture, the protracted reading of the Bible, a long hour and a half of devotions before breakfast, a long grace,

⁶
Manning, p. 121.

⁷
Bronte, p. 67.

the singing of a hymn, the prayer of thanks for their inedible breakfast of burnt porridge.

It was an age of sermons. In fact, there was nothing in abundance at Lowood except sermons. The body might be starved, but the soul was provided for most generously. G. M. Young, in Portrait of an Age wrote:

A young man brought up in a careful home might have heard, whether delivered or read aloud, a thousand sermons. If we consider the effect, beginning in childhood of all the preachers on all the congregations, or men loud or unctuous, authoritative or persuasive, speaking out of a body of acknowledged truth to the respectful audience below them, we can see why the homiletic cadence, more briefly, Cant, is so persistent in Victorian oratory and literature.⁸

This forced morality and religiosity was repugnant to Charlotte's nature, and in the persons of Miss Temple and the pupil Helen Burns she characterizes those who had the fibre to resist such indoctrination, and who dared to make a stand against the peculiar puritanical morality which stifled personality. Helen Burns, resigned to the unfairness and hopelessness of their situation, nevertheless expressed her belief in the supremacy of a God of love. In these words she endeavours to comfort the

⁸

Young, p. 14.

new girl, Jane Eyre:

I hold another creed; which no one ever taught me, and which I seldom mention, but in which I delight and to which I cling; for it extends hope to all; it makes Eternity a rest - a mighty home, not a terror and an abyss.⁹

Charlotte mentions the use of monitors in the school at Lowood. Bell and Lancaster's system of using older pupils to assist the teachers in 'hearing lessons' in the crowded classrooms was a common practice in Victorian schools. G. M.

Young writes:

Under the monitorial system the more forward children imparted the elements to the juniors in the groups. As a device for getting simple ideas into simple heads as fast as possible it was successful.¹⁰

The school building that Charlotte describes was quite typical of the establishment of the day. It was an old bobbin-mill, with stone floors, set in a valley beside a brook. G. M. Young wrote that school buildings in the Victorian Age were rarely good, often indifferent, sometimes thoroughly bad.¹¹

⁹
Bronte, p. 62.

¹⁰
Young, p. 58.

¹¹
Ibid., p. 58.

The state of the Cowan Bridge school, or its literary counterpart, Lowood, evoked a bitter controversy after the publication of Mrs. Gaskell's Life of Charlotte Bronte in 1857. This is described in Three Virgins of Haworth:

After the publication of Jane Eyre there were many readers who recognized, in the sinister "Lowood" (derived from the poignant memories of a child of eight), the establishment directed by the Reverend Carus Wilson, and identified Wilson himself with the character of Brocklehurst, the "clergyman of black marble".¹²

In a letter to "The Halifax Guardian" while the controversy of the Cowan Bridge School was raging, Mr. A. B. Nicholls, Charlotte's husband, printed an excerpt from a letter written by a former pupil of the school:

On first reading Jane Eyre several years ago I recognized immediately the picture there drawn, and was far from considering it any way exaggerated; in fact, I thought at the time, and still think the matter rather understated than otherwise . . . the system at Cowan Bridge was a very harsh one, and I was very glad to hear that an improvement took place after the school was removed to Casterton, for it was much needed.¹³

Charlotte writes that after eight years,

¹²
Romieu, p. 29.

¹³
Shakespeare Head Bronte, IV, pp. 302-03.

first as a pupil and then as a teacher at Lowood, her character, Jane Eyre, advertises for a position as governess. Jane's thoughts, as she tries to envisage in her imagination her future employer, reflect Charlotte's Aunt Branwell's early training:

Mrs. Fairfax! I saw her in a black gown and widow's cap; frigid, perhaps, but not uncivil; a model of English respectability. Thornfield! that, doubtless, was the name of her house: a neat, orderly spot, I was sure.¹⁴

When Jane reached Thornfield she found her pupil, a little girl of eight just come from France, eager to show her accomplishments to her new governess. Jane soon discovered that her education consisted of even more superficialities than English society demanded, and it was more inclined to the theatrical. She sang a tune from an opera, recited poetry, and wished to display her dancing skill. She was completely uninhibited, and comported herself with a degree of affectation that astounded Jane. It was evident that her education had been directed to attracting attention, and when Jane attempted to introduce solid academic work she found her pupil disinclined to apply herself.

¹⁴
Bronte, p. 97.

The party at Thornfield described in Jane Eyre furnishes interesting glimpses into society circles, and gives us a picture of an 'educated' young lady who has been taught by music and dancing masters, has acquired 'polish' at a private finishing school. To Jane's way of thinking, which of course was Charlotte's own, the superficiality of such an education was glaringly evident.

With the young ladies of marriageable age stress was laid on accomplishments. Jane and Mrs. Fairfax discuss Blanche Ingram, the belle of Mr. Rochester's house party:

She was greatly admired of course?

Yes indeed, and not only for her beauty but for her accomplishments.¹⁵

Charlotte Bronte was only one of many writers who spoke out in disdain about the female accomplishments which masqueraded as education for girls. Manning, in Dickens on Education, writes:

Mrs. William Grey testified before the Society of Arts in 1871 that the aim was not how to become desirable wives, but rather how to catch desirable husbands. Mrs. John Sandford, in her Women in Her Social and Domestic Character, condemned the education given to adolescent girls, urging that it be "more solid and less flashy", that it rid itself of

its excessive exhibitionism in the form of childish sketches, piano repertoires, faintings, hysterics, sighings, and "improvements".¹⁶

That such conditions were rife, and that they existed for many decades after the Bronte sisters and other writers openly ridiculed them, is evident from the conclusions of the Schools Inquiry Commission of 1864-67, which condemned girls' education in general for "want of thoroughness and foundation, want of system, showy superficiality, inattention to rudiments, undue time given to accomplishments and those not taught intelligently".¹⁷

In the character of Blanche Ingram Charlotte depicts the patronizing attitude of a lady of social position who has a superior opinion of herself because of a 'vener' of education:

She tried to impress the guests with her knowledge of botany; she played; her execution was brilliant; she sang: her voice was fine; she talked French apart to her mama.¹⁸

In short, her education was for the purpose of outshining her competitors.

16
Manning, p. 122.

17
Ibid.

18
Bronte, p. 193.

The attitude of Victorian society toward the governess or tutor has already been discussed in a previous chapter. In Jane Eyre this disrespectful attitude can be seen in the conversation between Blanche and her mother at the house party:

Mary and I have had at least a dozen in our day; half of them detestable and the rest ridiculous, and all incubi - were they not, Mama?

My dearest, don't mention governesses; the word makes me nervous. I have suffered a martyrdom from their incompetency.¹⁹

Then follows their diatribe on governesses in general, the low-spirited ones, the coarse and insensible ones, the refined ones they delighted in shocking, in short, every kind of governess had been an object of sport to them, a sport in which their mamas took delight as well. This discussion was carried on quite intentionally, in a tone loud enough for Jane to hear. It was a delight to them to remind her of her inferior position; they had a total disregard for the feelings of the governess, on whom they deliberately inflicted pain.

Society demanded that the Victorian young lady be educated to comport herself on every occasion to shine at the best possible advantage.

19

Ibid.pp. 197-98.

Every pose must be studied for effect, but must appear ever so casual. Jane describes the girls taking up their positions in the drawing room to await the entrance of the gentlemen:

They dispersed about the room, reminding me by the lightness and buoyancy of their movements, of a flock of white, plummy birds. Some of them threw themselves in half-reclining positions on the sofas and ottomans: some bent over the tables and examined the flowers and books; the rest gathered in a group around the fire: all talked in a low but clear tone which seemed habitual to them.²⁰

Every move had as its purpose the hope of impressing others:

Miss Ingram took a book, leant back in her chair, and so declined further conversation. I watched her for nearly half an hour; during all that time she never turned a page.²¹

Miss Ingram sums up the philosophy of country society in a single sentence:

As to the gentlemen, let them be solicitous to possess only strength and valour; let their motto be:—Hunt, shoot, and fight: the rest is not worth a fillip. Such should be my device, were I a man.²²

From the foregoing references to Jane Eyre it can be seen that, in her most popular novel, Charlotte Bronte made a bold indictment of Victorian

²⁰Ibid., p. 191.

²¹Ibid., p. 217.

²²Ibid., p. 200.

education.

The Professor, the first novel Charlotte wrote, was not published until 1857, two years after her death. It throws some interesting light on the subject of education in her day. Charlotte's sojourn in the Belgian capital first as a pupil and afterwards as a teacher in the school of Madame Heger, was a turning point in her life, for it was in her loneliness in a strange land that she mastered "self". The Professor and Villette, both inspired by her experiences in Brussels, are autobiographical to a large degree, and from these two novels we can see Charlotte's assessment of European education in this period.

Charlotte had her romantic tendency in check when she wrote The Professor. She was in the full tide of reaction from the romantic exuberance of her infernal world, her Angria, and she was under the influence of Professor Heger's stern classicism. Most of her critics consider it her weakest novel, but for the purpose of this study it is a highly significant one. Through it runs a keenness of observation, a sharp, clear delineation of character, and, having as its background a school on the con-

continent, an implied comparison of English and European attitudes toward education.

The attitude of the materially-minded, newly-rich Englishman toward intellectual pursuits we see in Edward Crimsworth's words to William, the younger brother:

What can you do? Do you know anything besides that useless trash of college learning - Greek, Latin, and so forth?²³

The elder brother was pleased that William had studied mathematics and knew something of German, for these skills would make him useful as a clerk in his office. He had no use for an education that was not fully utilitarian.

It is well . . . that you are acquainted with something useful - something that may enable you to earn your board and lodging.²⁴

Utilitarians had little use for purely classical pursuits, yet in Edward's attitude toward William we sense a brooding jealousy for the younger brother's scholastic attainments. William sensed it:

Antipathy is the only word which can express the feeling Edward Crimsworth had for me . . . My

23

Charlotte Bronte, The Professor (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., n.d.), p. 13.

24

Ibid., p. 14.

southern accent annoyed him; the degree of education evinced in my language irritated him, my punctuality, industry, and accuracy fixed his dislike and gave it the high flavour and poignant relish of envy; he feared that I should one day make a successful tradesman. Had I been anything inferior to him, he would not have hated me so thoroughly; but I knew all that he knew, and, what was worse, he suspected that I kept the padlock of silence on mental wealth in which he was no sharer.²⁵

The young William left England and found employment as an English teacher in a Brussels boarding school. The insular Englishman's horizons broadened. The skill possessed by so many European students in living languages amazed him; their ignorance, and what was immeasurably worse, their indifference concerning England and all things English was not at all flattering to one who had thought of England as being the centre of culture. Here, across the Channel, England was thought of as the periphery. This, without doubt, was the situation as Charlotte herself had experienced it, and her perception and her honesty are admirable.

William found the boys in his class unruly, and it was only with tenacious effort that he was able to hold the upper hand. He describes his pupils

25

Charlotte Bronte, The Professor, pp. 24-25.

thus:

Their intellectual faculties were generally weak, their animal propensities strong; thus there was at once an impotence and a kind of inert force in their natures. They were dull, but they were also singularly stubborn, heavy as lead, and, like lead, most difficult to move.²⁶

He found that these phlegmatic pupils were incapable of much in the way of mental exertion.

Having short memories, dense intelligence, feeble reflective powers, they recoiled with repugnance from any occupation that demanded study or deep thought.²⁷

The successful handling of these pupils required rare tact and diplomacy. Singly they were cowardly, but en masse their insubordination knew no bounds.

William quickly assessed their natures, and applied the proper mixture of consideration and firmness.

Under the guise of a male, Charlotte is drawing her own portrait as an English teacher in a continental school. William was a teacher of acute sensibility, as she herself was; when he describes his pupils we know that this is Charlotte's description of her own class in Brussels. She writes of their impudent freedom of speech, the conceited

²⁶
Ibid., p. 60.

²⁷
Ibid., p. 89.

coquetry and flirtatious airs that changed to taciturn sullenness at the slightest reproof. Discipline and propriety were terms of which they knew nothing. They represented every strata of society, from demoiselles de magasins to countesses. Charlotte found their manners atrocious:

In dress all were nearly similar and in manners there was small difference; exceptions there were to the general rule, but the majority gave the tone to the establishment, and that tone was rough, boisterous, marked by a point-blank disregard of all forbearance toward each other or their teachers, an eager pursuit by each individual of her own interest and convenience and a coarse indifference to the interest and convenience of every one else. Most of them could lie with audacity when it appeared advantageous to do so.²⁸

From William's description of the teachers at the school we could presume that Charlotte found these teachers uninteresting and disinterested. In Frances Henri, the poor proud little governess, we see the fictional counterpart of Charlotte herself - loving to learn, but hating to teach:

Frances toiled for and with her pupils like a drudge, but it was long ere her conscientious exertions were rewarded by anything like docility on their part . . . A pupil whose sensations are duller than those of his instructor while his nerves are tougher and his bodily strength greater, has an immense ad-

vantage over that instructor, and he will generally use it relentlessly, because the very young, very healthy, very thoughtless know neither how to sympathize nor how to spare.²⁹

What shocked Charlotte most was the fact that some of these pupils had been at school for twelve years, and were in an unbelievable state of ignorance and apathy. We recall that Charlotte herself had been at Miss Wooler's school for eighteen months as a pupil. These European pupils had none of her hunger for knowledge. This is Mrs. Gaskell's description of her:

She was an indefatigable student: constantly reading and learning; a strong conviction of the necessity and value of education was hers.³⁰

Learning was to Charlotte, all her life, a pearl of great price. The indifference of these pupils toward education was particularly painful to her.

Charlotte writes of William Crimsworth's invitation to take tea with Madame Pelet and Madame Reuter. In her description of the two old Belgian ladies we are reminded that the struggle of Aunt Branwell to instill habits of orderliness and neat-

²⁹
Ibid., p. 122.

³⁰
Gaskell, I, p. 92.

ness into her little nieces at the parsonage had lasting effect; we recall that Aunt Branwell prized such virtues next to godliness. Charlotte's description of the Belgian women indicates that she was profoundly shocked by their slovenly dress, disheveled hair, run-down slippers and shabby cotton camisoles. Aunt's crisp lace collars, white cap and black silk gown were symbols to Charlotte of Victorian respectability. Young writes on this topic:

Cleanliness is next to godliness. The Victorian insistence . . . on neatness, tidiness, the well-brushed frock and the well-swept room is significant . . . Neatness is the outward sign of conscious respectability.³¹

Charlotte takes an objective view of herself in her description of the British-English girls at the school; it is quite evident that it is herself and Emily she is depicting. Although she is making a conscious effort to be objective, one can discern her insularity in her comparison of the British with the continental girls:

Their characteristics were clean but careless dress, ill-arranged hair (compared with the tight and trim foreigners) erect carriage, flexible figures, white and taper hands, features more irregular but also more intellectual than those of the Belgians, grave and modest countenances, a general air of native

31
Young, p. 24.

propriety and decency . . . Proud, too, was the aspect of these British girls; at once envied and ridiculed by their Continental associates, they warded off insult with austere civility, and met hate with mute disdain. They eschewed company-keeping, and in the midst of numbers seemed to dwell isolated.³²

Villette is considered by many critics to be Charlotte's best novel. In this story she relives her Brussels experience; like Frances Henri, Lucy Snowe is a phase or aspect or portion of herself; like The Professor, Villette gives an English teacher's impression of Belgium schools. We find Madame Heger again, in the person of Madame Beck, a smooth, energetic, competent woman who rules by incessant surveillance, espionage, and intrigue. We find pupils as unruly as those in The Professor; they do not respond to an "honour system", but are manageable only by incessant restraint and by fear of being found out in misdemeanours:

They were so accustomed to restraint, that relaxation, however guarded, would be misunderstood and fatally presumed on. She (Madame Beck) was sick, she would declare, of the means she had to use, but use them she must; and after discoursing with dignity and delicacy to me, she would move away on her 'souliers de silence' and glide ghost-like through the house, watching and spying everywhere, peering through every key-hole,

listening behind every door.³³

Charlotte found this school run on a less rigorous schedule and with a greater degree of efficiency than were the Yorkshire schools. Remembering her own weary days of teaching at Miss Wooler's at Roe Head, and her sister Emily's drudgery in the school near Halifax, Charlotte sees much to admire in this Belgium school. A comparison of the following accounts will illustrate this:

My sister Emily is gone into a situation as teacher in a large school of near forty pupils, near Halifax. I have had one letter from her since her departure; it gives an appalling account of her duties - hard labour from six in the morning until near eleven at night, with only one half-hour of exercise between. This is slavery. I fear she will never stand it.³⁴

Here was a great house, full of healthy, lively girls, all well dressed and many of them handsome, gaining knowledge by a marvellously easy method, without painful exertion or useless waste of spirits; not, perhaps, making very rapid progress in anything; taking it easy, but still always employed, and never oppressed. Here was a corps of teachers and masters more stringently tasked, as all the real head-labour was to be done by them, in order to save the pupils, yet having their duties so arranged that they relieved each other in quick succession whenever the work was severe. Here, in

33

Charlotte Bronte, Villette (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., n.d.), p. 79.

34

Shakespeare Head Bronte, I, p. 162.
(Charlotte's letter to Ellen Nussey, October 2, 1837).

short, was a foreign school, of which the life, movement and variety made it a complete and most charming contrast to many English institutions of the same kind.³⁵

From Charlotte's description of the girls Lucy Snowe faces in her classroom we can see that Charlotte found them different in many ways from English girls. These students had spent many years in a variety of boarding schools; they knew the ropes; they exhibited a savoir-faire in side-stepping work; they were uninhibited by any indoctrination in humility, or by any religious or moral scruples. Madame Beck warned Lucy before taking her into the classroom:

But let me tell you these are not quiet, decorous English girls you are going to encounter . . . They always throw over timid teachers.³⁶

Lucy found that

the "continental" female is quite a different being to the "insular" female of the same age and class. I never saw such eyes and brows in England . . . eyes full of insolent light, and brows hard and unblushing as marble.³⁷

Lucy was shocked at their lack of moral principle:

Once or twice I made an unpremeditated attempt

³⁵Charlotte Bronte, Villette, p. 81.

³⁶Ibid., p. 85.

³⁷Ibid., p. 86.

to rectify some of their singularly distorted notions of principle; especially, I expressed my ideas of the evil and baseness of a lie.³⁸

Charlotte makes the point, as she did in The Professor, that education for girls on the Continent was as showy and superficial as it was in England at the time. Of one English girl who had been trained in a number of continental boarding schools, Lucy Snowe says:

There were but three things she practised in earnest - namely, music, singing, and dancing . . . Such mere trifles as lessons in history, geography, grammar, and arithmetic she left undone or got others to do for her.³⁹

She was a typical English society girl; she was a child of pleasure.

Work or suffering found her listless and dejected, powerless and repining; but gaiety expanded her butterfly's wings.⁴⁰

Here is the English society girl's contempt for the governess:

I suppose you are nobody's daughter, since you took care of little children when you first came to Villetta.⁴¹

³⁸
Ibid., p. 92.

³⁹
Ibid., p. 95.

⁴⁰
Ibid., p. 160.

⁴¹
Ibid., p. 164.

Of herself, the girl said:

I have had a Continental education, and though I can't spell, I have abundant accomplishments . . . I am pretty; you can't deny⁴² that. I may have as many admirers as I choose.

Here Charlotte Bronte gives us a picture of an English girl, pampered and spoiled by a dotting guardian, educated at the best continental schools, showing no greater degree of real culture, no greater respect for worth-while achievement than did Blanche Ingram in Jane Eyre.

Shirley is the most objective of Charlotte Bronte's novels. Although it is not autobiographical, the inevitable references to education, the passion of the Brontes, are to be found in this work also.

Early in the story, Caroline, the orphaned niece of the rector, startles that worthy gentleman with the announcement that she wants to go out as a governess. In a fury he turns on her:

While I live, you shall not turn out as a governess, Caroline. I will not have it said that my niece is a governess . . . Pooh! mere nonsense! I'll not hear of governessing.⁴³

42

Idem.

43

Charlotte Bronte, Shirley (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., n.d.), p. 191.

It was a degradation to which even the dependant of a poor rector need not stoop.

There is a governess in the story in the person of Mrs. Pryor, who relates her experiences to Caroline:

I have been a governess myself for a great part of my life . . . It was my lot to enter a family of considerable pretensions to good birth and mental superiority, and the members of which also believed that 'on them was perceptible' an unusual endowment of the 'Christian graces'. I was early given to understand that 'as I was not their equal', so I could not expect 'to have their sympathy.' It was in no sort concealed from me that I was held a 'burden and a restraint in society.'⁴⁴

In a later chapter Mrs. Pryor, in describing herself to Caroline says:

I was a recluse, desolate, young, and ignorant - a toil-worn governess perishing of uncheered labour, breaking down before her time.⁴⁵

The status of Louis Moore, the tutor, was no better than that of the governess in any Victorian household:

Yes, Louis Moore was a satellite of the house of Sympson - connected, yet apart; ever attendant, ever distant. Each member of that correct family treated him with proper dignity. The father was

44

Ibid., p. 374.

45

Ibid., p. 428

austerely civil, sometimes irritable; the mother, being a kind woman, was attentive, but formal; the daughters saw in him an abstraction, not a man. It seemed by their manner, that their brother's tutor did not live for them.⁴⁶

The 'Shirley' of the story is in love with Robert Moore, yet she remained totally indifferent to the dreary position of Robert's brother, Louis, the tutor at the Symptons.:

She was not, perhaps, haughty to him, but she never noticed him - she let him alone. He came and went, spoke or was silent, and she rarely recognized his existence.⁴⁷

To make a social equal of a tutor was unthinkable; it was almost beneath her dignity to condescend to speak to him.

Louis sensed her feeling of superiority and showed his bitterness in these words:

With animals I feel I am Adam's son, the heir of him to whom was given dominion over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. Your dog likes and follows me. When I go into that yard, the pigeons from your dovecot flutter at my feet. Your mare in the stable knows me as well as it knows you, and obeys me better.⁴⁸

Charlotte Bronte herself had often found solace in the show of affection of animals and birds which assuaged her loneliness when among strangers in

⁴⁶
Ibid., p. 448.

⁴⁷
Ibid., p. 449.

⁴⁸
Ibid., p. 452.

whose home she was the insignificant governess.

She was, herself, the poor, proud little governesses of her novels, and the fictional teacher in the private schools. She wrote fearlessly of what she saw, and what she herself experienced. From her letters and her novels we are able to gain substantial knowledge of Victorian attitudes toward education.

CHAPTER V

VICTORIAN ATTITUDES TOWARD EDUCATION AS REFLECTED IN THE NOVELS OF ANNE BRONTE

Although Anne Bronte is the least successful of the three sisters as a novelist, for the purpose of this study she is fully as important as Charlotte. Her total time spent in the teaching profession was longer than either Charlotte's or Emily's; her first novel, Agnes Grey, has as its whole plot and purpose the rendering of an account of a governess's life in private families; her second, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, gives an excellent insight into Victorian attitudes toward education as Mrs. Graham concerns herself with the upbringing of her young son.

Agnes Grey is the story of a penniless parson's daughter who sets out with high hopes to alleviate some of the financial trials of her family by taking a position as a governess. It is a tale of disillusionment and heartbreak. Instead of the kindly, motherly type woman she has envisioned as her mistress, her first employer is a dour, critical, stone-eyed woman; the master is tyrannical and rude; the children are uncontrollable; the governess is

shown no respect by the elders, the servants, or the children.

Miss Winnifred Gerin, in her most interesting study, Anne Bronte, expressed the opinion that Anne's novel, Agnes Grey, was almost completely autobiographical. For this reason it provides excellent source material for a study of the attitudes of society in those years toward education.

Rousseau's treatises on education were still fashionable.¹ This influential author had asserted that childhood had a right to happiness, that it was an independent state, and not simply an ante-room to maturity. Every educator of our own day would concur. But Rousseau's accent on naturalism gave parents the idea that they must not repress or curb any impulses, but that the child, by trial and error, would achieve appropriate and proper behaviour.

Agnes Grey finds herself in charge of three most uninhibited children, Tom, a boy of nine, and his two younger sisters. Their mother, Mrs. Bloomfield, makes it clear that they can be led, but not driven. In the Bloomfield home we can see the influ-

¹ Emilie and Georges Romieu, Three Virgins of Haworth (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1930), p. 34.

ence of the educators Thomas Day and Maria Edgeworth who were, about this time, expressing themselves on new-fangled notions of discipline. The governess must not reprove the children. Anne, who is herself 'Agnes Grey', brought up under the strict regime of Aunt Branwell, finds her own standards of upbringing hopelessly outmoded in the Ingham home, as does Agnes Grey in the Bloomfield's.

As for a code of morality, it seemed these children had none. The boy's sadistical cruelty to the birds he caught in snares was revolting to the sensitive governess. To cause any one of God's creatures to suffer unnecessarily was, to her way of thinking, bestial and depraved. Anne's gentle spirit had struggled against accepting Aunt Branwell's Calvinistic teachings of the depravity of human nature. Yet here, in the world of fashionable society, it was difficult to deny its validity, as it seemed to be evident not only in the children, but in their elders as well. When the governess announced that she had crushed the birds to save them from Tom's tortures, the indifferent and callous attitude of the uncle and the mother of the boy shocked her:

Ha! ha! ha! Never mind, Tom, I'll get you

another brood tomorrow.

I am sorry, Miss Grey, that you should think it necessary to interfere with Master Bloomfield's amusements; he was much distressed by your destroying the birds . . . a child's amusement is scarcely to be weighed against the welfare of a soulless brute.²

The "pleasure principle" of the age infected the household; the children wanted to do nothing. The governess, lacking the help and support of the parents, was powerless to enforce any rules. Anne writes:

The task of instruction was as arduous for the body as the mind. I had to run after my pupils to catch them, to carry or drag them to the table, and often forcibly to hold them there till the lesson was done. Tom I frequently put into a corner, seating myself before him in a chair, with a book which contained the little task that must be said or read, before he was released, in my hand.³

Mary Anne, the six-year old, would drop down like a leaden weight, or utter violent screams; the four-year old had the defence of spitting in the faces of those who incurred her displeasure, or bellowing like a bull.

All were determined to be naughty, and to tease Miss Grey, and put her in a passion.⁴

²Anne Bronte, Agnes Grey (London: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1954), p. 401.

³Ibid., p. 387.

⁴Ibid., p. 392.

The description of the tasks of the governess at the Bloomfields' had a parallel in real life in Anne's experiences at the Inghams'. Charlotte, in a letter to Ellen Nussey, writes of Anne's trials:

Both her pupils are desperste little dunces - neither of them can read, and sometimes they even profess a profound ignorance of the alphabet; the worst of it is the little monkies [sic] are excessively indulged and she is not empowered to inflict any punishment.⁵

In another letter to Ellen Nussey, January 24, 1840, Charlotte again writes of Anne:

You could never live in an unruly, violent family of modern children, such, for instance, as those at Blake Hall. Anne is not to return. Mrs. Ingham is a placid, mild woman; but for her children, it was one struggle of life-wearying exertion to keep them in anything like decent order.⁶

Anne was drawing from real experience when she had her fictional governess say:

They knew no shame; they scorned authority which had not terrors to back it; and as for kindness and affection, either they had no hearts, or such as they had were so strongly guarded and so well concealed, that I, with all my efforts, had not yet discovered how to reach them.⁷

Agnes Grey's second position was with the

⁵
Shakespeare Head Bronte, I, p. 175.

⁶
Ibid., p. 196.

⁷
Anne Bronte, Agnes Grey, p. 402.

Murray family at Horton Lodge. This family was the fictional counterpart of the Robinsons of Throp Green where Anne was a governess and Branwell was a tutor.

Miss Grey described the master as a blustering, roystering, country squire, and Mrs. Murray as a handsome, dashing woman of forty whose main interest was the social whirl.

Winnifred Gerin gives this description of Mrs. Robinson:

Mrs. Robinson was not very certain what she required of the governess. So long as she put a polish on her daughters' acquirements and gave her, personally, no trouble at all, she would do.⁸

Agnes Grey says of her employer:

For the girls, she seemed anxious only to render them as superficially attractive as they could possibly be made, without present trouble or discomfort to themselves, and I was to act accordingly - to study and strive to amuse and oblige, instruct, refine, and polish, with the least possible exertion on their part, and no exercise of authority on mine. With regard to the boys, it was much the same; only instead of accomplishments I was to get the greatest possible quantity of Latin grammar and Valpy's Delectus into their heads in order to fit them for school - the greatest possible quantity at least without trouble to themselves.⁹

Miss Grey gives in minute detail her appraisal

⁸
Gerin, Anne Bronte, p. 155.

⁹
Anne Bronte, Agnes Grey, pp. 411-12.

of Miss Rosalie Murray. It is significant for the purpose of this thesis, for it is a sort of summation of observations made by Charlotte and Anne Bronte of an educated young lady in the early Victorian period:

Miss Murray was about sixteen when I came, and decidedly a very pretty girl . . . I wish I could say as much for mind and disposition as I can for form and face . . . Towards me when I first came she was cold and haughty, then insolent and overbearing, but on a further acquaintance she gradually laid aside her airs, and in time became as deeply attached to me as it was possible for her to be to one . . . of my position: for she seldom lost sight, for above half an hour at a time, of the fact of my being a hireling and a poor curate's daughter. And yet, upon the whole, I believe she respected me more than she herself was aware of, because I was the only person in the house who steadily professed good principles, habitually spoke the truth, and generally endeavoured to make inclination bow to duty . . . She had never been taught to moderate her desires, to control her temper, or bridle her will, or to sacrifice her own pleasure for the good of others . . . Her mind had never been cultivated . . . till fifteen she had troubled herself to acquire nothing; then the love of display had roused her faculties, and induced her to apply herself, but only to the more showy accomplishments.¹⁰

Of Miss Matilda the governess said:

She was a veritable hoyden . . . The manner in which she learnt her lessons and practised her music was calculated to drive any governess to despair.¹¹

¹⁰
Ibid., pp. 412-13.

¹¹
Ibid., p. 414.

The elder boy, John, the governess considered unteachable, at least for a governess under his mother's eye; the younger, Charles, tried her patience sorely; at ten he could not read correctly the easiest lines in the simplest book.

To Anne Bronte, for whom learning was a passion, and who was herself a co-author of the "Gondal" series at the age of ten, this state of ignorance and indifference was unbelievable.

The idea that no effort should be expected from the pupil, mental or physical, that he should be permitted to indulge his inclination for pleasure, comes directly from Emile, and indicates how profound Rousseau's influence was in the first part of the nineteenth century. These are Rousseau's words:

Hold childhood in reverence . . . give nature time to work before you take over her business, lest you interfere with her dealings. You assert that you know the value of time and are afraid to waste it. You fail to perceive that it is a greater waste of time to use it ill than to do nothing, and that a child ill taught is further from virtue than a child who has learnt nothing at all. You are afraid to see him spending his early years doing nothing. What! is it nothing to be happy, nothing to run and jump all day? . . . Do not be afraid of so-called idleness.¹²

12

Rousseau, p. 71.

This cult of naturalism, bequeathed to England as well as to the continent by Rousseau, by way of the writers of the Romantic Age, as before mentioned, had penetrated deeply into the psychology of education in the early Victorian Age. The perception with which Anne Bronte described her pupils in Agnes Grey plainly shows this.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

A point of interest about Anne's two novels is that in subject matter they do not repeat each other. The suffering heroine of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall is not a poor, plain governess, but a rich and handsome woman. However, from it we can gather insights into Victorian attitudes toward education, for the heroine, Mrs. Graham, is deeply concerned with the upbringing of her young son, Arthur, and we can see the influence of the age in the methods she adopts.

The gossips of the village are not sparing in their advice to the young mother, and from their suggestions and their gossip some of the accepted ideas concerning education can be seen. After their first visit to Wildfell Hall the village ladies discuss Mrs. Graham's ignorance on certain points which they considered to be of utmost importance:

On household matters, and all the little niceties of cookery and such things, that every lady ought to be familiar with, whether she be required to make practical use of her knowledge or not.¹³

We are introduced to the Wilson family early in the story - Mrs. Wilson and her two sons and a daughter, a young lady from a boarding school who, because of her advantages, feels vastly superior to the village girls.

Their sister Jane was a young lady of some talents, and more ambition. She had, at her own desire, received a regular boarding-school education, superior to what any member of the family had obtained before. She had taken the polish well, acquired considerable elegance of manners, quite lost her provincial accent, and could boast of more accomplishments than the vicar's daughters.¹⁴

Anne depicts, in her character Jane Williams, yet another example of the flower of girls' boarding schools in Victorian days, as superficially educated, as proud and supercilious from her pinnacle of superiority as George Eliot's Rosamind Vincy in Middlemarch.

Anne Bronte wrote The Tenant of Wildfell Hall during the period of her brother Branwell's suicidal debauchery; the sight of a life wasted by dissipation was horribly real to her, and she pondered the

13

Anne Bronte, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, p.20.

14

Ibid., p. 24.

mistakes in his upbringing that were responsible for this tragic end. Anne, of the three sisters, was most influenced by Aunt Branwell's early teaching on the utter depravity of the human soul, and the sins of the flesh. She shared with her sisters the belief that the cause of Branwell's degradation was the lack of training and discipline in youth to build the stamina to avoid the pitfalls of life. He was an only son, spoiled by a too-indulgent father, idolized by three doting sisters, in an age when society looked upon the male as a being endowed with superior intelligence, determination, and will.

In her novel Anne shows a small boy being trained, as Branwell never was. When Mrs. Graham brings her son to return her neighbours' social call, the hostess offers the boy a glass of wine. Mrs. Graham says:

He detests the very sight of wine, and the smell of it almost makes him sick. I have been accustomed to make him swallow a little wine or weak spirits-and-water, by way of medicine when he was sick, and in fact, I have done what I could to make him hate them.¹⁵

The author seems to be giving her own philosophy of education - a conditioning of the child's mind to associate alcohol in all its forms with unpleasant

¹⁵Ibid., p. 31.

sensations.

The associationistic psychology of Locke, Hume, and Hartley influenced Victorian educational practices. The theory of association was widely adhered to, and it was invoked to cover almost anything that could happen in mental life, except original sensations. The principle stated that when any past event of experience is recalled, the act of recollection tends to bring again into use other events and experiences that have become related to this event in one or more of certain specified ways. Locke coined the phrase 'association of ideas'.

J. M. Stevens in Educational Psychology says:

Various theories of associationism flourished between 1750 and 1900. According to these theories of associationism, the mind, far from being a single unit, was thought to be merely the aggregate or sum total of a large number of separate, minute ideas, sensations, and feelings. These were all tied together by the process of association. A clap of thunder in the outside world, for instance, causes me to experience a sensation of noise. It happens that in past experience, moreover, this same kind of noise occurred during a very eventful experience in a sailboat. Because of association, the noise, when it now occurs, does not come alone, but drags along with it the ideas that were present during the sailboat episode, and which have become linked to the idea of the thunder clap by virtue of associations. Each of these latter ideas, in turn, is tied to a large number of other ideas, and these also are drawn into my awareness through bonds of association. My mind is nothing more than the aggregate or cluster of ideas, thoughts, feelings, and decisions that

I am aware of from time to time.¹⁶

At the time the novels of the Bronte sisters were written, the sensationistic-associationistic psychology of these earlier educators was being given a new impetus by James and John Stuart Mill, whose theories had a great effect on the early Victorian mind.

In Book II there is an extract from Helen's diary which gives in greater detail her efforts in habit-forming, or conditioning her son to dislike spirits:

He was inordinately fond of them for so young a creature, and, remembering my unfortunate father as well as his, I dreaded the consequence of such a taste. But if I had stinted him in his usual quantity of wine, or forbidden him to taste it altogether, that would only have increased his partiality for it, and made him regard it as a greater treat than ever. I therefore have given him quite as much as his father was accustomed to allow him, - as much, indeed, as he desired to have, but into every glass I surreptitiously introduced a small quantity of tartar-emetic, just enough to produce inevitable nausea and depression without positive sickness. Finding such disagreeable consequences invariably to result from this indulgence, he soon grew weary of it, but the more he shrank from the daily treat, the more I pressed it upon him, till his reluctance was strengthened to perfect abhorrence. When he was thoroughly disgusted with every kind of wine, I allowed him, at his

16

J. M. Stevens, Educational Psychology: The Study of Educational Growth (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1958), p. 241.

own request, to try brandy and water, and then gin and water; for the little toper was familiar with them all, and I was determined that all should be equally hateful to him. This I have now effected; and since he declares that the taste, the smell, the sight of any of them is sufficient to make him sick, I have given up teasing him about them, except now and then as objects of terror in cases of misbehaviour. Once or twice when he was sick I have obliged the poor child to swallow a little wine by way of medicine . . . not that I think it of any real service in a physical sense, but because I am determined to enlist all the powers of association in my service. I wish this aversion to be so deeply grounded in his nature that nothing in after-life may be able to overcome it.¹⁷

We have noted in Charlotte's novels the Victorian idea that there was something disgraceful in a girl's earning her own living. Anne also makes reference to this attitude. When Esther Hargrave was being forced by her mother into a financially advantageous marriage, her defence was:

I threaten mama sometimes that I'll run away, and disgrace the family by earning my own livelihood, if she torments me any more.¹⁸

Mrs. Hargrave and her daughter are come back from London . . . her mother sought out an excellent match for her, and even brought the gentleman to lay his heart and fortune at her feet; but Esther had the audacity to refuse his noble gifts.¹⁹

¹⁷ Anne Bronte, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, p.274.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 324.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 277.

The novel points in many instances to the belief of the Victorians in the superiority of the lordly male. A great part of a female's education was directed to the art of being a good wife. Mrs. Markham was giving Rose this lesson:

You know, Rose, in all household matters, we have only two things to consider: first, what's proper to be done, and, secondly, what's most agreeable to the gentleman of the house - anything will do for the ladies.²⁰

In Arthur Huntington's words to his wife we can see that the gentleman of the house was not above resenting the fact that his wife put her Lord on a higher level than her husband:

To my way of thinking, a woman's religion ought not to lessen her devotion to her earthly lord.²¹

Much has been written about the effect on the Bronte children of Aunt Branwell's rigid religious training. Her stern Methodist doctrine was the religious diet on which many Victorian children were reared. What sets the Bronte children apart, however, is the fact that with it there was lacking the sense of security of parents' love, in which all

20

Ibid., p. 51.

21

Ibid., p. 160.

children find their greatest comfort and sense of security. Anne shows, to a greater extent than do Charlotte and Emily, her struggle to reconcile the avenging God of Aunt Branwell's teaching with the God of mercy she herself adhered to. In Helen Huntington's diary are these words:

How could I endure to think that that poor trembling soul was hurried away to everlasting torment? It would drive me mad. But thank God I have hope - not only from a vague dependence on the possibility that penitence and pardon might have reached him at last, but from the blessed confidence that . . . God, who hateth nothing that He hath made, will bless it in the end.²²

Anne Bronte often unburdened her heart in verse; it is often more explicit than her prose to convey her mood. It is not good poetry; it has the swing of the Methodist hymns she learned as a child at Aunt's knee. Among her verses are some truly pathetic statements of the lonely misery of the governess. While teaching the Robinson girls she wrote of herself as:

Wandering and toiling without gain,
The slave of others' will;
With constant care and frequent pain,
Despised, forgotten still.

Anne's two novels, like all of Charlotte's

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Ibid., p. 334.

are permeated with the attitudes and the influences of the age in which she lived. Because it was in the field of education that she made , with very few exceptions, her only contacts with the world outside her own small village, it is not surprising that in her novels one can discern many of the Victorian attitudes toward education.

CONCLUSION

This study will, I hope, enable the reader to share with me a deeper appreciation of the contribution made by these two Bronte sisters in the field of education and of creative writing.

The minds of the Bronte children were shaped and molded by educative forces inside their homes and by their contacts with educational institutions for brief periods at various times in their short lives. Their native passion for education was like a thirst that could not be slaked. Charlotte wrote in a letter to Ellen Nussey, August 7, 1841, that she had 'such an urgent thirst to see - to know - to learn . . . I was tantalized by the consciousness of faculties unexercised . . . I so longed to become something better than I am.'

When they went into the world and saw with their own eyes what was accepted in the name of education, their natures rebelled against the sham and the superficiality of the learning of their day. They were such avid students themselves, and had so eagerly taken advantage of every opportunity to learn

which was given to them, that they were profoundly shocked at the attitude of pupils who resisted their efforts to impart their treasured knowledge.

While it must be admitted that their methods of instruction would not be sanctioned by modern psychologists, and their inexperience with children was a handicap, their very love of knowledge could not but have made some impression on children brought up with a respect for learning. The great difficulty they had as teachers is an indictment not only of their pupils, incorrigible as they were, but of a society that put such a cheap value on things of the mind.

Although many novelists deplored the unappreciative attitude of society toward the governess, it was nowhere in English literature depicted with such candour and realism as in the novels of Charlotte and Anne Bronte. As Phyllis Bentley wrote:

The experience they gained in agony later gave masterpieces to the world.¹

The work of the governess was looked upon as a commodity to be bought and sold, in a society which, having a vast pool of cheap labour at its disposal, had not yet learned the necessity for considerate treatment of those to whom wages were paid.

¹Bentley, p. 30.

Charlotte and Anne had the misfortune in all their posts as governesses to be at the beck and call of families who were on their way up in the world, and who saw no reason to lessen their own importance by studying their own, or reproving their children's behaviour to the governess.

In the early years of the Victorian Age the wheels of industry were creating, not only masses of material goods, but a materially minded society, that put its highest value on opulence and ostentation. It is interesting to reflect on how the dynamics of an age affect the human mind, and how elements in the environment of the Victorians shaped and molded their attitudes toward education.

* * *

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