

Social Norms and Challenges Faced by Women in the Selected Works of Charlotte Brontë

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Abstract

This research paper undertakes a critical analysis of the social norms and challenges faced by women as depicted in three major novels by Charlotte Brontë: *Jane Eyre* (1847), *The Professor* (published posthumously, 1857), and *Villette* (1853). Set against the backdrop of Victorian England and nineteenth-century Belgium, Brontë's fiction interrogates the intersecting constraints of gender, class, and patriarchal ideology that circumscribed women's lives. Through her protagonists — Jane Eyre, Frances Henri, and Lucy Snowe — Brontë examines how social conditioning, economic dependence, surveillance, and the denial of intellectual agency shaped women's identities and opportunities.

The study argues that Brontë's works constitute a sustained feminist critique of Victorian social structures, articulating a vision of female autonomy grounded in moral integrity, education, and self-respect. By positioning her heroines as agents who resist as well as negotiate oppressive norms, Brontë challenges the ideological frameworks that reduced women to passive objects of domesticity and male authority. The paper employs feminist literary theory alongside close textual analysis to reveal how Brontë's narrative strategies — including first-person voice, psychological depth, and symbolic imagery — serve to expose and contest the gendered realities of her era.

Keywords: Charlotte Brontë, Victorian women, feminist literary criticism, patriarchy, female agency, social norms, *Jane Eyre*, *The Professor*, *Villette*, gender and class.

Introduction

Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855) stands as one of the most significant literary voices of the Victorian era, whose fiction fundamentally challenged and reshaped the possibilities for women's representation in nineteenth-century English literature. Born in Thornton, Yorkshire, Brontë drew extensively upon her own experiences — as a clergyman's daughter, a governess, a teacher, and a woman navigating rigid social hierarchies — to produce novels of lasting psychological depth and social resonance. Her works, particularly *Jane Eyre* (1847), *The Professor* (posthumously published 1857), and *Villette* (1853), remain foundational texts for understanding how Victorian social norms constrained women's lives and how women might, at least in fiction, assert their capacity for autonomy and self-determination.

Victorian England was structured by a firmly entrenched patriarchal ideology. Women were largely excluded from public life, denied meaningful access to formal education, subjected to severe economic dependence, and legally subordinated within the institutions of marriage and family. Their social worth was measured primarily by their adherence to ideals of modesty, domesticity, and deference to male

authority (1). Within this context, literature served both as a vehicle for perpetuating social norms and, in the hands of writers like Brontë, as a means of challenging and subverting them.

This paper undertakes a close critical analysis of social norms and women's challenges in *Jane Eyre*, *The Professor*, and *Villette*. It argues that across these three novels, Brontë consistently interrogates the mechanisms by which patriarchal Victorian society constrained female agency — through economic dependence, limited access to education and work, the surveillance of female behavior, the demands of respectable femininity, and the psychological costs of social exclusion. At the same time, it demonstrates that Brontë imagines alternative possibilities for women's selfhood: possibilities grounded in intellectual independence, meaningful work, moral courage, and the refusal of total subordination.

Biographical and Historical Context

Charlotte Brontë was born on April 21, 1816, in Thornton, Yorkshire, the third of six children of Patrick Brontë, an Anglican clergyman, and his wife Maria Branwell. After her mother and two elder sisters died in childhood, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë were raised in the parsonage at Haworth on the Yorkshire moors, where they cultivated an intense inner literary life, producing collaborative stories and creating imaginative fictional worlds (2). Charlotte's formal education at Cowan Bridge school — later satirized as the Lowood Institution in *Jane Eyre* — was an early encounter with the institutional control and physical hardship that would recur as themes in her fiction.

As a young adult, Brontë worked as a governess and teacher — professions that offered some of the very few avenues of economic survival available to educated but un-propertied women in her time (3). Her experiences in these roles, as well as her time studying and teaching in Brussels under Constantin Héger, provided direct material for the social observations embedded in her novels. The intellectual stimulation, personal loneliness, and class ambiguity she encountered in Brussels, in particular, shaped the psychological and sociological dimensions of *Villette* (4).

Victorian society situated women firmly within the ideology of 'separate spheres': the domestic realm was positioned as the natural and proper domain for women, whose primary social roles were those of wife, mother, and keeper of the household. Men occupied the public sphere of business, politics, and intellectual life. Women who sought to enter public or professional life faced significant social stigma (5). In the mid-nineteenth century, the 'surplus women' or 'redundant woman' problem — the large number of unmarried women who could not be absorbed into domestic roles — generated considerable social anxiety, reflected in literary representations of governesses and schoolteachers who occupied precarious social positions (6). It was within this context that Charlotte Brontë published *Jane Eyre* in 1847 under the pseudonym Currer Bell. The novel achieved immediate commercial and critical success, though it provoked controversy for its emotionally assertive female protagonist and its critical attitude toward social institutions including religion, class, and marriage (4). Brontë continued to explore these themes in *Shirley* (1849), *Villette* (1853), and *The Professor*, which was not published until after her death. She died in 1855 at the age of thirty-eight, leaving behind a small but extraordinarily influential body of work.

Jane Eyre: Agency, Class, and Patriarchal Oppression

Social Norms and Female Behavior

Jane Eyre (1847) is Charlotte Brontë's most celebrated and most analyzed novel. From its opening pages, the text is in dialogue with the social norms governing women's lives in Victorian England: norms that demanded female submission, silence, and self-erasure. Jane's position as an orphaned dependent in the

Reed household introduces the reader immediately to the twin axes of class and gender that will structure her entire narrative (7). As a child, Jane is acutely aware of her social vulnerability — she has no wealth, no family, and no legal protections — and yet she resists the psychological subordination that her situation is designed to produce. Her instinct for self-defense and her insistence on her own dignity are presented not as violations of social norms but as expressions of her moral nature.

Victorian social norms for women were pervasive in their demands for passivity and deference. Women were expected to be governed by emotion rather than reason, to exercise influence rather than authority, and to find their purpose in service to others (8). Brontë's depiction of Jane challenges this model at every turn. Jane's narrative voice — assertive, analytical, and morally independent — represents a radical literary innovation: the interiority of a woman who insists on her own perspective and her own standard of judgment. As critics have noted, Brontë does not merely describe the social norms constraining women but dramatizes their effects from within a female consciousness, making their costs visible to the reader (9).

Class and Economic Dependence

Central to Jane Eyre's social critique is its exposure of the 'double burden' of class and gender that constrained women like Jane. Victorian society offered educated but propertyless women very few avenues of economic survival. Teaching and governessing were among the only respectable options, yet both placed women in a deeply ambiguous social position — expected to possess refinement and culture, yet treated as neither fully family members nor servants (10). The governess occupied a liminal social space that stripped her of the protections associated with either status: she was exposed to the social distance of the family above her and denied the solidarity of the domestic staff below.

At Thornfield Hall, Jane's relationship with Rochester dramatizes the power differential that economic dependence creates. Despite their intellectual compatibility and mutual affection, Jane is consistently reminded of the social gulf between them. Rochester's wealth and status enable him to treat her position with a degree of paternalism, and his initial proposal represents a move toward patronage — the gift of clothes and jewels — as much as partnership. Jane's famous insistence on her independence — 'I am no bird; and no net ensnares me' — is both an emotional declaration and an economic claim: she refuses to be placed in a position of financial and social inferiority (11). Only after Jane inherits a fortune from her uncle does she return to Rochester, and crucially, only then can their relationship be constructed on terms of genuine equality.

Brontë's treatment of other women in the novel further illuminates the operations of economic dependence. Blanche Ingram represents the commodification of femininity in the marriage market: she is valued for her beauty and social connections, but is ultimately powerless when her financial circumstances shift. Bertha Mason, locked in the attic, is a tragic figure whose loss of agency is inseparable from colonial and patriarchal systems of inheritance and legal control (12). Through these contrasting female figures, Brontë maps the terrain of women's economic vulnerability in Victorian society.

Patriarchal Oppression and Female Agency

Jane Eyre is structured around the repeated encounter between Jane's agency and the patriarchal forces that seek to suppress it. Mr. Brocklehurst, the hypocritical headmaster of Lowood School, represents institutionalized patriarchy operating through religious authority to produce female docility (13). His regime is designed to break the spirits of 'strong-willed' girls and produce women who are submissive and

self-denying — a parodic embodiment of the social ideal. Jane's resistance to Brocklehurst's authority is an early expression of a capacity for self-assertion that will define her throughout the novel.

The novel's most complex exploration of patriarchal authority centers on Jane's relationship with Rochester. Rochester is not a simple villain: he is intelligent, perceptive, and capable of genuine feeling. But he is also the product of a patriarchal society that has given him extraordinary power — over his estate, his servants, and the women in his life — and he exercises this power with a degree of unconscious entitlement that Brontë subjects to careful scrutiny (14). His attempt to commit bigamy by concealing his first marriage from Jane is a dramatic enactment of this entitlement: the assumption that his desires and needs can override Jane's right to informed consent.

Jane's response — her refusal to remain as his mistress despite her love for him — is central to the novel's feminist argument. She insists that her moral integrity and legal standing are not negotiable: 'I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you.' This assertion of agency in the face of emotional and social pressure represents one of Victorian literature's most radical articulations of female selfhood (15). Jane's eventual return to Rochester, after she has achieved financial independence and he has been humbled by his injuries, models a relationship of genuine mutuality — a re-imagining of marriage founded on equality rather than subordination.

Education as Empowerment

Throughout *Jane Eyre*, Brontë frames education as both a practical means of survival and a source of personal dignity and agency. Jane's persistence in learning at Lowood, despite the institution's harsh conditions, transforms her from a vulnerable dependent into a woman capable of supporting herself (16). Her work as a teacher and governess is consistently presented not merely as economic necessity but as an expression of competence and selfhood. When Jane later uses her inheritance to fund schooling for the poor in Morton, the novel suggests that women's access to education has broader social implications: it is presented as a catalyst for collective transformation, not merely personal advancement.

The Professor: Work, Self-Determination, and Social Prejudice

Gender Roles and Social Conditioning

Charlotte Brontë's first completed novel, *The Professor*, shares many of the social preoccupations of *Jane Eyre* but situates them within the distinctive environment of a Belgian school, where the intersection of nationality, class, and gender creates a particularly dense web of social regulation. Written in the mid-1840s though published posthumously in 1857, the novel is often read as Brontë's most explicitly autobiographical work, drawing on her experiences in Brussels. Its portrayal of women's social conditioning, limited economic options, and the constraints of the marriage market anticipates and deepens the concerns she would explore in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* (17).

Victorian ideology maintained a pronounced division between the public and domestic spheres, positioning women as suited by nature for submission, modesty, and domestic service, and men for rational, professional, and public life (18). The world of *The Professor* is structured by these assumptions. The school environment that dominates the narrative is a space in which women are trained not for self-governance or intellectual achievement but for docile compliance and social accomplishment. As Brontë depicts it, the curriculum prioritizes superficial attainments — those 'marketable' in the marriage market — while discouraging original thought or genuine intellectual inquiry.

Frances Henri, the novel's central female character, is acutely aware of the precariousness of her social position as an orphaned, propertyless teacher. Her internalized awareness of social stigma — 'Had I not married, I should have failed, and died weary and disappointed, despised and of no account, like other single women' — illustrates how Victorian social norms worked through internalization as well as external enforcement, creating women who were their own disciplinarians (19). Brontë presents this internalized self-deprecation not as an accurate reflection of Frances's worth but as the product of a society that openly policed and pathologized female independence.

Marriage, Necessity, and the Possibility of Partnership

Marriage in *The Professor* functions as both a social necessity and a site where gendered norms are contested and occasionally subverted. For Victorian women without independent income or social standing, marriage represented the principal route to economic security and social respectability. The stigma surrounding unmarried women was powerful, and the economic need to marry often overrode considerations of personal fulfillment or mutual respect (20).

Brontë critiques this coercive framework through her portrayal of the divergent outcomes of the novel's female characters. Zoraïde Reuter, the scheming headmistress, ultimately retreats into marriage as a survival strategy after her professional ambitions are thwarted, illustrating how women's authority in the professional sphere remained contingent and provisional, requiring constant male validation. Frances Henri, in contrast, embodies a more radical possibility: she insists on continuing her professional work as a teacher after marriage, modeling a partnership grounded in mutual respect and the recognition of women's right to meaningful labor outside the home (21). Her demand to continue teaching is presented as a small but significant act of resistance against the Victorian expectation that marriage should represent the endpoint of women's professional and intellectual lives.

Work, Education, and Female Self-Determination

The most sustained theme in *The Professor* is the relationship between women's access to education and work and their capacity for self-determination. Frances Henri's trajectory — from marginalized orphan teacher to co-director of a successful school — is presented as a narrative of self-realization through professional dedication and intellectual commitment. Brontë resists the sentimental notion that women find their proper fulfillment in romantic love alone; for Frances, it is in the classroom that she feels most fully herself, most competent, and most respected (22).

However, Brontë is careful to depict the structural limits on women's educational and professional aspiration. The school in which Frances teaches is itself a patriarchal institution, organized to produce compliant and ornamental women rather than independent thinkers. The curriculum and discipline are designed to keep women within prescribed social boundaries, making the educational environment simultaneously a site of potential liberation and an instrument of constraint (23). Frances's intellectual curiosity and hard-won linguistic fluency are her weapons against this system — tools she deploys quietly and persistently to claim a measure of authority over her own mind and life.

Social Prejudice, Surveillance, and Power Imbalances

Throughout *The Professor*, Brontë depicts the mechanisms of social surveillance — the constant observation and judgment of women's behavior — as a pervasive form of social control. The girls and women in the school are subject to continuous monitoring; their relationships, reputations, and ambitions

are permanently at risk from rumor, jealousy, and the politics of educational and domestic spaces (24). The novel is particularly attentive to the ways in which this surveillance is internalized, becoming a constraint that women impose on themselves and on each other. Solidarity between women is difficult to sustain in an environment shaped by scarcity and competition for social security and professional advancement.

Villette: Redundancy, Psychological Toll, and Resistance

The 'Redundant Woman' and Economic Dependence

Villette (1853) is widely considered Charlotte Brontë's most psychologically complex and formally accomplished work. The novel, based closely on Brontë's experiences in Brussels, follows Lucy Snowe — an English orphan without family or fortune — as she travels to the fictional city of Villette to seek employment in a French-language school. In doing so, Villette engages directly with what contemporary commentators called the 'redundant woman' problem: the growing population of unmarried, self-supporting women who existed outside the normative social structures of marriage and family (25).

Lucy Snowe's economic vulnerability is central to the novel's social critique. Orphaned and without inheritance, she must rely entirely on her own capacity to work — a position that places her outside the social frameworks that normally provided women with status and security. Her journey to Villette, born of poverty and a desperate desire for self-sufficiency, introduces the novel's persistent concern with the precariousness of women's economic lives. Employment as a teacher offers Lucy a fragile foothold, but it is characterized by meager wages, constant insecurity, and total dependence on the goodwill of her employer (26).

Brontë complicates the conventional narrative resolution for women — marriage as the gateway to security and respectability — by refusing to provide Lucy with this comfortable conclusion. Unlike typical Victorian heroines, Lucy does not achieve happiness through romantic rescue or inheritance; her ultimate satisfaction is professional, achieved through the establishment of her own school after years of hardship. This refusal to romanticize women's condition — and to insist on the dignity of women's labor as a route to independence — constitutes one of Villette's most radical social arguments (27).

Emotional and Psychological Toll

Villette is distinctive in Victorian fiction for the depth and candor with which it depicts the emotional and psychological costs of social exclusion. Lucy Snowe's inner life is characterized by persistent loneliness, repression, and bouts of severe depression. When she is left alone at the school during the summer holiday, her psychological deterioration — rendered with notable clinical precision by Brontë — offers one of the Victorian novel's most unflinching accounts of mental suffering (28).

Brontë frames this psychological suffering as socially produced rather than individually pathological. Lucy's depression is not a personal weakness but the product of chronic isolation, overwork, emotional suppression, and the systematic denial of the human needs for intimacy, recognition, and security. Victorian gender norms — which demanded self-control, reserve, and the suppression of female emotion in the service of propriety — create the conditions for precisely this kind of inward suffering (29). Lucy's habitual self-concealment and her practice of withholding her true feelings from those around her are survival strategies in a world where female emotional expression is viewed with suspicion and judgment.

Patriarchal Structures and the Limits of Autonomy

Villette offers Brontë's most sustained and sophisticated analysis of the patriarchal structures governing women's lives. The pensionnat managed by Madame Beck is a microcosm of the broader social system: an institution ostensibly headed by a woman but thoroughly organized along patriarchal lines, with rules of surveillance, obedience, and moral rectitude designed to produce compliant, marketable femininity (30). Madame Beck's authority, significant within her domain, is ultimately contingent on male and ecclesiastical approval — she operates with careful deference to the expectations of church and community, illustrating how even women in positions of power remain bound by the limits drawn by patriarchal authority.

The Catholic religious milieu of Villette adds a further dimension to Brontë's analysis of patriarchal control. The novel depicts Catholic religious authority — through confession, moral instruction, and communal ritual — as another mechanism for regulating female consciousness and behavior. Père Silas's attempt to direct Lucy toward conversion is portrayed not merely as a spiritual intervention but as an effort to claim authority over her inner life. Brontë, who was suspicious of Roman Catholicism, uses this dimension of the novel to explore how religious institutions can function as instruments of patriarchal social control, particularly in their governance of women's interiority (31).

Lack of Autonomy and Strategies of Resistance

Despite the pervasive constraints on her autonomy, Lucy Snowe is not a passive victim of social forces. Brontë depicts her as exercising subtle and persistent forms of resistance within the available space. Her commitment to self-scrutiny, her cultivation of intellectual independence through private reading and writing, and her determination to establish her own school are all expressions of an agency that is real even if modest in its scope (32). Lucy's resistance is rarely overt — the social costs of open defiance are too high — but it is consistent and purposeful.

Brontë also uses narrative technique as a form of feminist argument in *Villette*. Lucy's unreliable narration — her withholding of information from the reader, her refusals of conventional emotional disclosure, her ambiguous treatment of key events — enacts formally the social constraints on female expression. The narrative's evasions mirror the evasions that social norms required of women, making the form itself a commentary on the limits imposed on women's self-representation (33). In this sense, *Villette* represents not just a depiction of women's social challenges but an attempt to develop a literary form adequate to the complexity of women's inner experience.

Comparative Analysis

Across *Jane Eyre*, *The Professor*, and *Villette*, Charlotte Brontë develops a sustained and multi-faceted critique of the social norms governing women's lives in Victorian England. Several key themes recur across all three novels, providing a coherent framework for understanding Brontë's feminist vision.

First, all three novels foreground economic dependence as the fundamental material condition of women's social vulnerability. Jane's precariousness as a governess, Frances Henri's marginalization as an orphaned teacher, and Lucy Snowe's poverty and insecurity as a foreign employee in *Villette* all reflect the same structural reality: that women without independent income were radically vulnerable to social exclusion and male authority. In each novel, the attainment of a degree of economic independence — however fragile — is shown to be a precondition of female self-respect and genuine agency (34).

Second, Brontë consistently positions education and intellectual development as central to women's emancipation. Each of her heroines is distinguished by intellectual capability and a commitment to learning, and in each novel this intellectual life is shown to be both a source of personal dignity and a means of resisting social subordination. At the same time, Brontë is attentive to the ways in which the social institutions governing education can themselves be instruments of patriarchal control, shaping women not for independence but for compliant femininity (35).

Third, all three novels analyze the psychological costs of patriarchal social norms. Whether in Jane's early experiences of emotional violence and social exclusion, Frances Henri's internalized self-deprecation, or Lucy Snowe's severe depressive episodes, Brontë documents how the systematic denial of women's needs and rights produces suffering that is social in its origin but experienced as intimate and personal (36). The novels' psychological depth is inseparable from their social critique: Brontë understood that patriarchal oppression does not operate only through external constraint but through the interior colonization of women's minds.

Fourth, Brontë consistently imagines the possibility of relationships — whether professional or romantic — founded on mutual respect and equality. The marriages she depicts in *Jane Eyre* and *The Professor*, and the professional partnership Lucy begins to build in *Villette*, all represent alternatives to the hierarchical and subordinating relationships that Victorian social norms prescribed for women. These are not idealized visions, but carefully negotiated possibilities grounded in the characters' struggles for economic independence and self-respect (37).

Conclusion

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, *The Professor*, and *Villette* constitute a sustained and searching engagement with the social norms and challenges that constrained women's lives in Victorian England. Through her fictional explorations of class and gender, economic dependence, patriarchal authority, education, and the psychology of social exclusion, Brontë developed one of the nineteenth century's most powerful feminist literary visions — one that refuses to accept the subordination of women as natural or inevitable and insists on the possibility of female autonomy, dignity, and self-determination.

The study of Brontë's work within the framework of feminist literary criticism reveals the extent to which her novels are not simply individual stories of personal struggle but systematic inquiries into the operations of social power. Her heroines' experiences are shaped by forces that are structural and ideological — by property law, by institutional religion, by the marriage market, by the educational system, and by the pervasive cultural ideology of the 'separate spheres' — as well as by individual acts of cruelty, condescension, or compassion. By situating personal experience within this larger social landscape, Brontë makes visible the mechanisms by which patriarchal societies reproduce themselves through the management of women's bodies, minds, and aspirations.

Brontë's contribution to feminist thought lies not only in her critique of what is but in her imagining of what might be. Her novels insist that women are capable of moral independence, intellectual achievement, and meaningful work; that relationships between men and women can be grounded in mutual respect rather than domination and subordination; and that the pursuit of dignity and self-determination is not unwomanly but essentially human. These arguments, first articulated in the mid-nineteenth century, remain a vital part of the ongoing conversation about gender, equality, and the social conditions for a fully human life.

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