

NARRATION IN THE NOVELS OF SELECTED NINETEENTH-
CENTURY WOMEN WRITERS: JANE AUSTEN, THE BRONTË
SISTERS, AND ELIZABETH GASKELL

by

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ABSTRACT

In this study I apply a feminist-narratological grid to the works under discussion. I show how narration is used as strategy to highlight issues of concern to women, hereby attempting to make a contribution in the relatively new field of feminist narratology.

Chapter One provides an analysis of *Pride and Prejudice* as an example of a feminist statement by Jane Austen. The use of omniscient narration and its ironic possibilities are offset against the central characters' perceptions, presented by means of free indirect style.

Chapter Two examines *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as a critique of *Wuthering Heights*, both in its use of narrative frames and in its at times moralistic comment. The third and fourth chapters focus on Charlotte Brontë. Her ambivalences about the situation of women, be they writers, narrators or characters, are explored. These are seen to be revealed in her narrative strategies, particularly in her attainment of closure, or its lack.

Chapter Five explores the increasing sophistication of the narrative techniques of Elizabeth Gaskell, whose early work *Mary Barton* is shown to have narrative inconsistencies as opposed to her more complex last novel *Wives and Daughters*.

Finally, I conclude that while the authors under discussion use divergent methods, certain commonalities prevail. Among these are the presentation of alternatives women have within their constraining circumstances and the recognition of their moral accountability for the choices they make.

Key terms: Feminism; Feminist Narratology; Focalizer; Free Indirect Style; Irony; Narration; Narrative Frames; Narrator; Reader; Women Writers.

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GLOSSARY: I enclose below a brief list of some of the terms I use in the hope that my definitions will clarify the exact ways in which I intend these terms to be understood:
focalizer, implied reader, narratee, narration, narrator.

Focalizer

The focalizer is the one who sees, and through whose eyes the reader is asked to look. The focalizer's mind and heart are open to the reader. If omniscient narration is used (as in Jane Austen), various characters may be used as focalizers at different times and to different degrees. In first-person narration, i.e. internal narration, the central character, narrator and focalizer usually converge to be a single character, but may have different roles (cf. *Jane Eyre*, *Villette*, and *Great Expectations*).

'[A]ll the items of the narrative content are filtered through some prism or perspective ('focalizer')' (Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, 1983:3).

Implied reader

I use the terms 'implied reader' and 'reader' almost interchangeably. I shall make it clear when by 'reader' I mean myself particularly, or a non-cooperative imagined 'real' reader, but mostly I shall be referring to the reader that appears to be implied by the text itself. In the case of *Jane Eyre* or *Villette*, for instance, this will be the reader who is frequently directly addressed. In the case of Gaskell, it will be the 'you' of the text. More subtly, in Austen, it is the one assumed to share the narrator's values, sense of irony, propriety, and so on.

The 'implied reader ... embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect - predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself. Consequently, the implied reader ... is a construct' (Wolfgang Iser, 1978:x).

Narratee

The narratee is the one to whom the internal narrator speaks. 'Within the text, communication involves a fictional narrator transmitting a narrative to a fictional narratee.'

(Rimmon-Kenan, 1983:3)

Narration

Narration is the means used to tell a story: it includes the point of view of the narrator, and the use of characters as focalizers. It includes, in other words, those who tell (external and internal narrators) and those who see (focalizers).

Narrator

The narrator is the persona of the one who tells the story. An internal narrator is part of the fictional world, whereas an external narrator is not part of the fictional world. A reliable narrator presents views consistent with those of the implied author, whereas an unreliable narrator denotes views in conflict, or at least in tension with those of the implied author.

INTRODUCTION

To study the nature of narratives, to examine how and why it is that we can construct them, memorize them, paraphrase them, summarize and expand them, or organize them in terms of such categories as plot, narrator, narratee, and character is to study one of the fundamental ways - and a singularly human one at that - in which we make sense.

(Gerald Prince, 1990:2)

Women authors ... reflect the literal reality of their own confinement in the constraints they depict.... Recording their own distinctively female experience, they are secretly working through and within the conventions of literary texts to define their own lives.

(Sandra Gilbert & Susan Gubar, 1984:87)

In this study I offer a reading of five novelists which is intended to be a contribution towards the relatively new field of feminist narratology, in which a relationship between narrative techniques and feminist content is established. The need for a link between the hitherto relatively disparate fields of feminism and narratology has been repeatedly articulated by Susan Sniader Lanser.¹ In 1989 Robyn Warhol also claimed: 'Until recently, narratology has not asked questions about gender, and feminist criticism, which by definition always asks the gender question first, has not inquired into narrative discourse' (1989:3). By bringing two disparate fields together I hope to be addressing the problem posed by Warhol. This study is an attempt to allow for narratology and gender to ask questions of each other and to answer some of them, at least in part.

The reasons why women write seem to me intimately connected to how they write and what they write. As the authors under discussion found themselves in a society which largely discriminated against women, in which they were

generally not treated as reasonable beings, in which they were mostly not properly educated, and where rational behaviour was barely expected from them,² they chose to deal with women's position in society in various innovative ways.

My particular concern is with the way the five women novelists with whom this study deals found ways to entertain their reading public with gripping stories on the subject of fictitious women's lives while making important points about real situations facing women (themselves included) of the day, particularly pertaining to the limitations of choice. What the sweeping popularity of the recent spate of films and television productions based on Jane Austen's novels suggests - and to which Barry Ronge, the SABC3 presenter, referred as 'this year's movie love-affair with Jane Austen'³ - is that the issues facing men and women of today have powerful resonances in Jane Austen's presentation of social, personal and economic matters. The nature of the restraints may be somewhat different (children nowadays are rarely disinherited purely on the grounds of their being female), but the misunderstandings, *faux pas*, and dashed expectations frequently experienced, along with the subtleties of approach required for successful courtship, are perhaps no less intriguing today than they were in the early nineteenth century.

I will be exploring the impact their being women had on the novelists' choice of narrative strategies, particularly in terms of their constructing of important female characters and

the significant events in their lives. In this study there will thus be a fairly free movement between biographical details, questions of narratology and choice of subject matter. I will argue that the women writers with whom I am dealing are all in various ways concerned with their position as women in a society written, as it were, by men. Their presentation of women characters, particularly heroines; the narrative stances adopted in their novels; their depiction of male-female relationships; and the resolutions of their novels - all these will be explored in order to discover to what extent women are presented as agents of choice and/or victims.

This question forms part of what Lanser has called a feminist narratology. According to Lanser, the 'act of writing becomes the fulfillment of desire':

Communication, understanding, being understood, becomes not only the objective of the narration but the act that can transform (some aspect of) the narrated world. In a universe where waiting, inaction, reception, predominate, and action is only minimally possible, the narrative act itself becomes the source of possibility.

(1986:357)

As Peter Brooks puts it, 'the text itself [is] a system of internal energies and tensions, compulsions, resistances, and desires' (1984:xiv). There are times when direct narrative commentary is seen to act in contradistinction to the movement of the text. Reasons for this will be explored from within a feminist framework and will be explored in relation to central issues Lanser raises, such as women telling their own story. This has a bearing on the way not only women characters are

depicted but also male characters, as seen by women.⁴

The purpose of this study is thus to explore the uniquely feminist content of the fiction under discussion, and the way narration is used as strategy by nineteenth-century women writers in presenting their material. Margaret Kirkham, for example, sees Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen as enlightened eighteenth-century feminists - as opposed to Marilyn Butler who sees Austen as arch-conservative, and politically reactionary.⁵ Women write about women issues, or the 'woman question', in all sorts of more or less obviously subversive ways - subversive, that is, of traditional patriarchal norms. This study will therefore be as thematic as technical, focusing on aspects of narration to highlight central concerns. Where narratology often focuses on technique at the expense of thematic concerns, feminist critique deals specifically with the presentation of female characters and gynocriticism with issues pertinent to women writing. 'Without an understanding of the framework of the female subculture, we can miss or misinterpret the themes and structures of women's literature, fail to make necessary connections within a tradition' (Elaine Showalter, 1986:133). Narratology will thus be placed within the broader context of feminism. I too believe that

If ... we situate difference in the insistence of a certain thematic structuration, in the form of content, then it is not true that women's writing has been in no way different from male writing.

(Nancy Miller, 1981:37)

In other words, when it comes to content, women's writing is different from men's. I attempt to prove that certain narrative strategies are appropriate tools for presenting thematic material. In the case of Emily and Anne Brontë, for instance, narration may be used as camouflage, as male narrative frames deceptively conceal women's stories. The camouflage may then be sabotaged from within.

By treating Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters and Elizabeth Gaskell as authors whose writings reveal a feminist basis, I show that all their writings - in different ways, and to differing degrees - are based on the assumption that men and women are spiritually and morally equal - obviously not that they are physically or biologically so.

In all the novels I examine in this study there are tensions within the text between the narrators' explicit and direct commentary and the effects achieved by means of narrative strategy. The narrators' commentary is frequently used to negotiate relations between the 'real' world of the author and the fictional world which the female characters inhabit. 'When we confront a complex network of interactions between author, narrator(s), characters, and audiences both real and implied', we are in fact dealing with 'point of view' (Lanser, 1981:13). It is this 'complex network of interactions' that I attempt to unravel.

My hypothesis is that there is a relationship between how narrative strategies are employed in the novels under

discussion in this study and the fact that the writers of the novels themselves were women. In other words, I am attempting to show how female consciousness influences narration - both in terms of direct narrative commentary and in terms of narrative strategy.

In this study a basic narratological grid - which encompasses concepts such as narrator, reader, focalizer, and plot - is applied to the works under discussion in order to discuss narration. I argue that in all the texts there is some feminist content and that, in the communication of this, narration functions as strategy. My definition of feminism is very broad, and aligned to what has come to be regarded as the Anglo-American position. It is based on the assumption that women and men share equality and accountability on both a moral and a spiritual plane.

I am not discussing technique as an end in itself⁶ - which occasionally seems to be the case with narratological studies - but as a way of facilitating my main project, which is to examine how and why women writers use narrative strategies for particular effects pertinent to their presentation of 'women issues'. The trap outlined below I hope to avoid:

What narratology has not produced is a convincing account of the essential intuitive leap from a series of events to an underlying theme. Indeed narratology now seems to be heading in another direction: toward the exclusive analysis of discourse and the denial that narratives tell stories at all.

(Ian MacKenzie, 1987:541)

This is the danger which Lanser addresses in her articles

attempting to bring together feminism and narratology.

In Chapter One, *Pride and Prejudice* is examined in terms of its narrative layering. The novel is explored in terms of its complex presentation of marriage as theme, but also as *telos*, as narrative goal and purpose. The effects of the omniscient narration employing both Elizabeth and Darcy selectively as focalizers are traced.

With the Brontës I look at the way the central female characters depict their identity, especially in religious terms. Various unorthodox notions of Christianity feed into and are expressive of the psychological make-up of the central female characters.⁷ As so much work has been done on the narrative devices in *Wuthering Heights*, I use this novel primarily as a springboard for my discussion of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in Chapter Two. With both novels, narratives are framed by male narrators but contain what are essentially women's stories. Chapter Three explores the construction of the female subject in fictional autobiography, *Jane Eyre*, where the narrator is the central character, and in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, where the narrator is external and dealing with 'fact', and where Gaskell's subject is her contemporary sister author. Chapter Four looks at *Villette*, Charlotte Brontë's most complex achievement, as a fictional form of spiritual autobiography, in which marriage as narrative goal is deferred in the ambiguity of the ending. Charlotte Brontë's work yields rich rewards in terms of the

contradictions and ambivalences present in women's quest for independence coupled with the longing for merging with a male partner. Because of the greater ambivalences in Charlotte Brontë and the more unresolved nature of the issues dealt with both in her novels and in this study, two chapters are devoted to her.

Chapter Five traces Elizabeth Gaskell's development as novelist in terms of her increasing control over her narrative stance. In my discussion of *Mary Barton* the narrative inconsistencies in the text are examined, as are the implications of changing the central character of the novel from John to Mary Barton. This chapter examines *Ruth* as the story of the 'fallen woman' turned saint, and the tensions and contradictions inherent in the narration in this female *Bildungsroman*. In my discussion of *Wives and Daughters* the narration of a range of views on women's education is explored, particularly in terms of how these affect the presentation of the complex dynamics surrounding the subject of marriage.

In terms of narrative theory, I rely primarily on Lanser, as well as Rimmon-Kenan and Mieke Bal, who are both based on Gérard Genette. My view, however, is that what women write about and how they write are intertwined:

[I]n dealing with women as writers, as much elasticity as possible is desirable; it is necessary to leave oneself room to deal with other things besides their work, so much has that work been influenced by conditions that have nothing whatever to do with art.

(Virginia Woolf, 1988:43)

I do not therefore believe that a purely technical analysis of Genette's kind is adequate or even appropriate for talking about women's fiction in the way I propose to do. Even Genette himself considers 'all this technology - surely barbaric to the lovers of belles lettres' and hopes for it no more than 'some transitory usefulness' (1980:263-64). Instead, I wish to marry two types of approach, a feminist and a narratological one, in discussing narration in nineteenth-century women's fiction. I intend showing that narrative methods are used as strategy by women authors in highlighting issues of pertinence to women. This is sometimes done subtly, as in the case of Jane Austen, and sometimes more obviously with first-person narration in Charlotte Brontë, for instance, specifically *Jane Eyre*.

Due to societal pressures, women were faced with hard choices, specifically concerning the attractions of marriage and the deprivations that frequently accompanied being single. By telling the stories surrounding such choices, they were at least in a position to choose which way the story would be told, and which method would most effectively present women's position. The act of narration thus becomes a form of empowerment.

What this study is not, however, is a retrospective definition of the authors I am looking at as radical feminists. I respect the distinctions Toril Moi makes between *feminist*, *female*, and *feminine* (1985:xiii, 113) and do not

wish to argue in this thesis that the female authors constituting the terrain of the present study are of necessity feminist activists, systematically engaged in correcting societal injustices towards women. What I do wish to suggest is that as women they share certain concerns, and even that they are feminists insofar as I define the term to mean the acceptance of equality of worth between men and women while respecting biological, psychological and emotional difference.⁸ I focus on their particular use of narrative strategies as an entry point into their various angles on issues concerning women. I am especially interested in the way women's choices are presented, particularly the constraints operating on the exercising of their options, a major one being whether to marry and if a choice between partners presents itself, whom to choose.

I do not believe that women necessarily write differently because they are women, but that certain concerns are common to them as women. It is the different ways in which they negotiate these concerns through the variety of narrative strategies they employ which constitute my area of study. I will be trying to show that all the authors I am dealing with had an awareness of various societal injustices functioning as different kinds of pressures on women, the primary one being that of economic dependence operating as a force pushing women towards marriage, even with men they did not find particularly congenial.⁹

In short, it is my intention to keep sight of the implications for women of the vantage points taken in the works under discussion. This is why I have decided to use the female pronoun when referring to 'the reader'. I hope to show that particular narrative techniques are employed in a strategic rather than arbitrary way.

ENDNOTES

1. See her articles 'Toward a Feminist Narratology' published in 1986 and 'Shifting the Paradigm: Feminism and Narratology' published in 1988 as a response to Nilli Diengott's 'Narratology and Feminism', also of 1988.
2. Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) describes the implications of viewing women as fundamentally irrational, in an age which exalted reason. The male-female dynamics in the marriages of the time were also seen to be intricately related to the inferior education women received.
3. The SABC 3 presenter of 'Cinema Cinema' on Saturday afternoons was referring to Emma Thompson's version of *Sense and Sensibility* (for the screenplay of which she was awarded an Oscar), and the release of films on *Emma* and *Persuasion* during 1996, when he talked about this 'astonishing revival of interest in Jane Austen'.
4. There is a contrast between the way Victorian women writers in general depict women characters, and the stereotypes of female characters depicted by say, Dickens and Thackeray. The aloof Estella in *Great Expectations*, and the sweet Amelia and the sharp Becky in *Vanity Fair*, contrast with the more in-depth depictions of male characters: Pip, for instance.
5. See Kirkham (1983:3-5) and (1983:39-47) specifically on Wollstonecraft. The book as a whole is entitled *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction*, and contrasts with Butler's views (1981).
6. I do provide a brief set of definitions of terms in the glossary on pp. v & vi, however.
7. Religion is thus also regarded as an aspect of narratology, a narrative that creates meaning and provides closure in the absence of earthly satisfactions. In other words, when stories fail to find their expected fulfilment (for the Victorian novel generally marriage for the heroine), the religious narrative provides a spiritual substitute in terms of union with the divine. This viewpoint will be seen to have particular relevance for the discussions of *Villette* and *Ruth*.
8. At this point one is tempted to agree with Rebecca West who said, 'I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute' (*The Chronicle*, 14 November 1913).

9. The extreme case of this would be the marriage Charlotte Lucas opts for with Mr Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*.

CHAPTER ONE

PLEASURE AS PLOT: NARRATIVE LAYERING IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

Pride and Prejudice does subscribe at least partially to myths about the glamour of social status and the fulfillment ideally offered by marriage, ... but only so that it can proceed to modify and repossess them from within.

(Claudia Johnson, 1988:91)

Jane Austen's heroines are not self-conscious feminists, yet they are all exemplary of the first claim of Enlightenment feminism: that women share the same moral nature as men, ought to share the same moral status, and exercise the same responsibility for their own conduct.

(Kirkham, 1983:84)

Pride and Prejudice is a feminist novel in the sense that women and men are depicted as equally complex and as equally responsible morally. In the depiction of Elizabeth Bennet, *Pride and Prejudice* provides the reader with a female character who takes her own happiness seriously. The reader is invited to share with the heroine the movement towards the less than inevitable conclusion which is happiness. The plot is constructed in such a way that Elizabeth's desire for happiness on her own terms rather than on her mother's, Lady Catherine's or Darcy's terms is rewarded. The pleasure she takes in pursuing her path is the pleasure the reader derives from following it. The interrelationship between the pleasure of the plot, the fulfilment of the heroine's desire for a suitable and happy marriage and the reader's decoding of the narrator's ironic commentary constitute the basis for a feminist-narratological reading of the novel.

The famous opening sentence, 'It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune

must be in want of a wife' (1972:51), immediately implies a relationship between narrator and reader: one in which they share the same ironic view of the situation described. Already the assumption is implicit not only that the reader is above such 'universal knowledge' but that she has - or can at least be persuaded to have - the same ironic view of those who hold this attitude.¹ '[M]ust' is indicative of the strength of the surrounding families' projection of need onto the unsuspecting bachelor. It is only Mr Bennet who at first refuses to cooperate with this perception, because he does not share it.

The second sentence reveals an interesting sympathy for men mercilessly viewed as eligible 'objects' available for purchase on the marriage market: 'However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters' (1972:51). The narrator displays a concern for the male perspective ('feelings [and] views'), with which the 'surrounding families' show themselves to be unconcerned. The daughters are also handled by their relatives with noteworthy casualness, as disposable by marriage. One of the many complex ways in which marriage is viewed in the novel is as a dumping ground for unwanted women.²

In the rest of the chapter, the reader is invited to share Mr Bennet's amusement (tainted with resignation) at his

wife's obvious ploys and entire lack of subtlety. In other words, in this chapter, the narrator situates herself closer to the male point of view and preserves her irony for the attitude of the grasping female, epitomized by Mrs Bennet. One is made aware that marriage takes place in the context of a cut-throat market where parents compete for eligible matches for their daughters.³ In this opening chapter the presentation of the heroine is done in terms which bring the reader closer to Mr Bennet's point of view and further increase the distance from Mrs Bennet's. Elizabeth is Mr Bennet's favourite daughter, and clearly her mother's least favourite. Later, of course, one notices that Mr Bennet is also construed as a very unsatisfactory parent and husband in certain respects.

The effect of the ironic tone⁴ of many of the narrator's comments is to create a sense of collusion with the reader. The purpose of the irony is to draw the reader into a conspiratorial relationship with the narrator and simultaneously, to distance the narrator from the action. Even Elizabeth, a character often used as focalizer, is not exempt from the narrator's gentle satire.⁵ Harsher satire is reserved for caricatures such as Mrs Bennet and Mr Collins. But through it all irony functions as a subtle measure to get the reader on the narrator's side, to see things as the narrator does. Sharing the narrator's views can ultimately lead to sharing the narrator's values.

When it comes to the characteristic tone of the narrator

in *Pride and Prejudice*, Barbara Hardy puts forward an argument which the very opening sentence of the novel appears to contradict:

In *Pride and Prejudice*, in spite of Jane Austen's delight in her heroine, her direct commentary is still sober and grave, though it has lost the spite and sourness of *Sense and Sensibility* ... It is as if all the playfulness has gone into Elizabeth Bennet, leaving none over for the narrator.... the author has withdrawn as far as possible, reserving her commentary and using her most neutral tones.

(1975:174)

The roles of narrator and heroine seem less precisely divided to me. The very choice of material, the choice of revealing how much, at what stage and to whom (be it to Jane, Elizabeth, Darcy, Bingley, the Gardiners, or the reader, for example), creates a lot of space for 'playfulness', the very quality Barbara Hardy finds lacking in the narrator. Furthermore, irony,⁶ as I have already suggested, is not neutral but rather a form of mask, again involving the reader in some kind of unmasking game, surely another type of playfulness.

An ironic distance is created between the narrator, who knows of Darcy's growing attraction towards Elizabeth, and Elizabeth, who is unaware of it. This gap in perception between the heroine and the reader creates an element of suspense and playful anticipation at what Elizabeth's reaction may be once she discovers Darcy's change in attitude.⁷ When one reads the novel for the first time, one may identify with Elizabeth's initial dislike of Darcy and be equally taken aback by his first proposal of marriage. However, because the

narrator has dropped numerous clues suggesting a change of attitude in Darcy towards Elizabeth, the reader has the opportunity to be considerably less shocked and surprised than Elizabeth. A very telling indication of Darcy's changing perspective of Elizabeth is the range of comments he makes on her appearance. She only hears the famous and most negative first one at the ball: 'She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me', a comment which leaves Elizabeth understandably 'with no very cordial feelings towards him': 'She told the story however with great spirit among her friends; for she had a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in any thing ridiculous' (1972:59). Already here we see the overlap between the role, personality and function of heroine, narrator and author to which Lanser (cited above) refers. They are all satirical storytellers.

The narrator selectively uses different characters as focalizer at different times. This skilful manipulation of inside information makes the reader aware of Darcy's changing perspective - he himself finding such a change of mind 'mortifying' - while Elizabeth is kept in the dark, all the time priding herself on her acumen as critical observer:

Occupied in observing Mr Bingley's attentions to her sister, Elizabeth was far from suspecting that she was herself becoming an object of some interest in the eyes of his friend. Mr Darcy had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty; he had looked at her without admiration at the ball; and when they next met, he looked at her only to criticise. But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that she had hardly a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful

expression of her dark eyes.

(1972:70)

Darcy here is the focalizer, the reader thus gaining insights into his inner thoughts and feelings which Elizabeth will only gain at the time of his first proposal. Not only has 'beautiful' replaced 'tolerable' in his language about Elizabeth; he also finds occasion to describe her to himself as 'intelligent'. Ironically, it is Miss Bingley - ever alert to anything that could affect her design to be the centre of Darcy's attentions - who is the first to be informed of his changed attitude to Elizabeth: 'I have been meditating on the very great pleasure which a pair of fine eyes in the face of a pretty woman can bestow' (1972:73). Thus while Elizabeth finds more and more grounds on which to dislike Darcy, the reader is provided with fewer.

At about this time, there is a very pertinent conversation on the subject of reading, as it relates to the topic of the 'accomplished woman' of the day. Elizabeth declines an invitation to play cards ('suspecting them to be playing high') and chooses instead to read, thereby eliciting the astonishment of Mr Hurst and the veiled mockery of Miss Bingley: 'Miss Eliza Bennet ... despises cards. She is a great reader and has no pleasure in anything else.' No doubt feeling uncomfortable with being sarcastically characterized as a 'blue stocking', Elizabeth rejects this definition of herself out of hand by responding emphatically: 'I deserve neither such praise nor such censure.... I am not a great reader, and

I have pleasure in many things' (1972:83). Darcy's definition of the accomplished woman culminates in the requirement that to all her other skills (listed by Miss Bingley and including 'a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages' not to mention the 'certain something in her air and manner of walking ...',) 'she must add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading' (1972:85). Reading here is an important motif, as it is in all the other novels,⁸ and Darcy's need for intelligence in a woman is highlighted. Elizabeth claims never to have seen 'such capacity, and taste, and application, and elegance ... united', justifiably critical of his exacting standard and obviously never dreaming that in her person she would come fully to satisfy his most personal requirements for a wife. Despite his objections to Elizabeth's family situation he will ultimately decide that she is the woman he most admires. It is both as narratee and reader of Jane's letters and then Darcy's own that Elizabeth firstly fans her dislike of him and subsequently changes her view of him.

* * *

The presentation of male characters in the novel also casts a useful light on the role and function of the narrator. The nature of the insights given the reader by the narrator in the presentation of the three male characters who may be regarded as a possible match to Elizabeth varies significantly from character to character. In the order of their appearance

in the novel they are Darcy, Collins and Wickham.

Darcy is presented as 'a deep, intricate character' (1972:88), to use Elizabeth's phrase. The reader is supplied with significantly more detail regarding particularly the nature of his feelings for Elizabeth than she herself is. However, the reader is also made party to Darcy's grave reservations vis-à-vis Mrs Bennet. One does not know how his conflict between attraction to the person of Elizabeth and contempt for her mother (and other relatives such as Lydia, Kitty and Mr Collins) may be resolved. The reader may well therefore align herself with Elizabeth who claims:

'...intricate characters are the most amusing. They have at least that advantage.' Later in the same conversation, she comments: '... people themselves alter so much, that there is something new to be observed in them for ever' (1972:88). This comment also anticipates the reader's initial inability to forecast confidently the outcome of Darcy's interest in Elizabeth.

Whereas the narrator seeks to persuade the reader that the consensus reached by the inhabitants of Meryton is simplistic, Elizabeth agrees for once with her mother (and the rest of the community) and has typecast Darcy as 'the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world'. (This occurs despite her self-proclaimed penchant for 'intricate characters'.) She therefore barely absorbs information to his credit - and to her credit the source is as unreliable as

Caroline Bingley's always biased account (1972:136-37) - while the reader through focalization is given more inside information on Darcy.

Collins is a stereotype of all that is pompous and foolish and remains a caricature. He is aptly assessed by Elizabeth and her father as pompous and idiotic, a view that is clearly endorsed by the narrator.

The character who causes both characters' and readers' assessments to do an about-turn is Wickham. (Darcy and Caroline Bingley are of course already aware of the kind of person Wickham is.) As Elizabeth aptly points out after her stay in Kent when Jane is attempting to find neither Darcy nor Wickham so bad:

`This will not do ... You never will be able to make both of them good for any thing. Take your choice, but you must be satisfied with only one. There is but such a quantity of merit between them; just enough to make one good sort of man; and of late it has been shifting about pretty much. For my part, I am inclined to believe it all Mr Darcy's, but you shall do as you chuse.'
(1972:252)

First Wickham appears to Elizabeth to be the most charming and agreeable man in the world, not to mention credible (`there was truth in his looks' [1972:128]). He is also readily forgiven by her for pursuing a woman on the basis of her fortune. However, Elizabeth finally comes to realize his lack of true worth. The narrator has more gently prepared the reader for this rude shock.

The narrator presents both male and female points of view with equal understanding though her sympathies differ markedly

depending on the sense (or lack of it) of the individual representative. Mrs Bennet and Mr Collins, for instance, are treated with equal contempt, and Elizabeth and Darcy with almost equal respect.

* * *

Jane Austen frequently foregrounds her heroines against the backdrop of other female characters, not infrequently sisters.⁹ This is both a useful and natural contrast as siblings frequently develop aspects of personality more forcibly in order to be distinguished from one another. In *Pride and Prejudice*, too, there is an interesting contrast between Jane and Elizabeth used by the narrator to foreground both the heroine's strong points and weak points. According to Elizabeth, Jane, the eldest of the Bennet girls, is '[a]ll loveliness and goodness' while Elizabeth herself is most frequently admired and enjoyed for the brightness of her eyes (1972:73, 82), her liveliness, wit and vivacity (1972:130, 388). According to Miss Bingley, her most ungenerous critic, she is characterized by 'an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country town indifference to decorum' (1972:82), 'that little something, bordering on conceit and impertinence' (1972:97).

Jane, however attractively presented, belongs in the order of simple rather than complex characters. Her only fault is that she is too good, if ever that could be construed as a fault. According to Elizabeth, 'to be candid without

ostentation or design - to take the good of every body's character and make it still better, and say nothing of the bad - belongs to [Jane] alone' (1972:62). Though 'better' than Elizabeth, Jane lacks the spark and vivacity which challenge Darcy in Elizabeth.¹⁰ Jane is in fact sometimes more right in her always generous assessment of others but her lack of objectivity is seen in her attempt at analysing the Wickham-Darcy case. Where Elizabeth presents all the wit and liveliness which the narrator wishes to project, Jane's is the voice of goodness. To the extent that Jane's desire to see only what is good makes her reticent in uttering hasty or condemning judgments she has the narrator's approval. She is, for instance, the only character who is not prepared to condemn Darcy for his behaviour towards Wickham (and in this regard she is the only one who is in fact right): 'Miss Bennet was the only creature who could suppose there might be any extenuating circumstances in the case, unknown to the society of Hertfordshire; her mild and steady candour always pleaded for allowances, and urged the possibility of mistakes - but by everybody else Darcy was condemned as the worst of men' (1972:176). In the final part of this sentence one hears the condemning tones of both Elizabeth and her mother, ominously and uniquely in agreement on this particular issue. That alone should have alerted Elizabeth to an error in her judgment, her mother being almost universally wrong in her assessments of situations, especially as regards proper values, but in this

case the strength of Elizabeth's prejudice blinds her. Jane in this case represents the voice of reason and obliquely thereby the narrator herself.

There are occasions where the discrepancy in Elizabeth's and Jane's judgment requires the reader to be very sensitive to the narrator's tone in order to select which of the two is more likely to be right. It is illuminating to attend to the presentation of Jane in the novel as a whole: one learns to appreciate Jane through Elizabeth's eyes - and gradually comes to realize that her virtues are undervalued even by Elizabeth, her most ardent admirer next to Charles Bingley. Jane 'possesses a useful capacity for doubting her own judgement' (Michael Williams, 1986:71), which makes her more ready than others to reassess and re-examine past modes of thinking about individuals which no longer seem valid or appropriate. She is thus more flexible than her lively sister Elizabeth and as such a useful tool in the narrator's hand for softening Elizabeth's often hasty and sometimes harsh judgments.

Part of Elizabeth's self-definition is shown to derive from the way she positions herself in relation to members of her immediate family. 'Nobody, who has not been in the interior of a family, can say what the difficulties of any individual of that family may be' (Emma Woodhouse in *Emma*, 1933:146). The admiration and love she feels for her elder sister Jane, her grateful acceptance of her father's confidence, esteem and affection, as well as her happy

selection of the Gardiners as effective parent-substitutes are presented by the narrator as compensations to Elizabeth for the absence of a mother whom she can truly respect. Jane and Elizabeth are shown to relate differently to Mrs Bennet. Jane is ever tolerant and sympathetic even though she is made to suffer by her mother's lack of discretion. At a late stage in the novel Elizabeth is still made so utterly miserable by her mother's behaviour (in this case her 'officious attention' to Bingley and ungracious snubbing of the very Darcy who has in fact rescued Lydia from a life of shame) that she feels 'years of happiness could not make Jane or herself amends, for moments of such painful confusion': "The first wish of my heart," said she to herself, "is never more to be in company with either of them [referring to Darcy and Bingley]. Their society can afford no pleasure, that will atone for such wretchedness as this! Let me never see either one or the other again!" (1972:347). While Elizabeth believes that she also represents Jane's point of view, the narrator's stance is, as usual, somewhat ironic; the reader is able to imagine Jane's position from the shift in Elizabeth's own attitude as in the very next paragraph one is provided with the wry comment that 'the misery, for which years of happiness were to offer no compensation, received soon afterwards material relief, from observing how much the beauty of her sister re-kindled the admiration of her former lover' (1972:347). Yet this does not alter the suggestion that Elizabeth, being quicker and more

intelligent than her elder sister, is also possibly more conscious, or at least more easily offended by their foolish, blundering mother, and consequently suffers more deeply. Mrs Bennet consistently causes Elizabeth misery, embarrassment, shame and confusion. In addition to this, it was clearly spelt out early on in the novel that 'Elizabeth was the least dear to her of all her children' (1972:145); such a mutual lack of sympathy between mother and daughter could clearly only exacerbate an awkward and painful situation. The possibility (however remote) of removal to Pemberley by marriage to Darcy is made to appear even more attractive under these circumstances.¹¹

In terms of the way in which Jane serves as a foil for Elizabeth, it is interesting to note how, after the very close and intimate relationship between them has been created, in which they are each other's chief confidante, the narrative then moves them apart, first geographically and then by means of Elizabeth's superior knowledge about aspects of Jane and Bingley's relationship, concealed from both Bingley and Jane. Because of Colonel Fitzwilliam's communication, which is endorsed by Darcy's own letter, Elizabeth and the implied reader start sharing areas of knowledge entirely concealed from Jane (and Bingley).

The characterization of Elizabeth is the most complex. In terms of the external narration, direct narrative commentary is combined with other characters' perceptions of Elizabeth to

provide an enticing and alluring portrait of a female character who combines quick thinking, wit and liveliness with a capacity for intense feeling. Her own self-presentation further stimulates the reader's interest. Most particularly, it is her position as focalizer, where it is her views and perceptions which are presented, which brings the reader closer to her than to any other character in the text.

Elizabeth is presented as confident and well used to relying on her wits,¹² but also shown to be deeply sensitive to embarrassment caused by other family members. In the course of the Netherfield ball, for instance, she is first of all embarrassed by her cousin's insistence on introducing himself to Lady Catherine's nephew: 'It vexed her to see him expose himself to such a man' (1972:140). Later on, she has the misfortune to be seated near her garrulous mother (who is also within earshot of Darcy), who is 'enumerating the advantages of the match' (1972:140) between Jane and Bingley: 'Elizabeth blushed and blushed again with shame and vexation' (1972:141). Her sister Mary's display at the piano causes 'mortification' and other 'most painful sensations': 'Elizabeth was in agonies' (1972:142). Elizabeth's feelings regarding the whole of the evening are summarized in the following paragraph, again showing her greater awareness of and sensitivity to the reception of her relatives by their hosts than her sister Jane:

To Elizabeth it appeared, that had her family made an agreement to expose themselves as much as they could

during the evening, it would have been impossible for them to play their parts with more spirit, or finer success; and happy did she think it for Bingley and her sister that some of the exhibition had escaped his notice, and that his feelings were not of a sort to be much distressed by the folly which he must have witnessed. That his two sisters and Mr Darcy, however, should have such an opportunity of ridiculing her relations was bad enough, and she could not determine whether the silent contempt of the gentleman, or the insolent smiles of the ladies, were more intolerable.

(1972:143)

Even much later, when Elizabeth and Darcy are securely engaged to be married and he has overcome his scruples regarding the 'degradation' (1972:221) involved in connecting himself with Elizabeth's family, she considers the enjoyment of her friend Charlotte's company 'dearly bought, when she saw Darcy exposed to all the parading and obsequious civility of her husband'. 'Mrs Philips's vulgarity' and Mrs Bennet's behaviour had the result that 'the uncomfortable feelings arising from all this took from the season of courtship much of its pleasure'. The negative 'shame' involved in this, however, makes Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy doubly profitable as indeed the narrator points out when she refers to 'the hope of the future': 'she looked forward with delight to the time when they should be removed from society so little pleasing to either, to all the comfort and elegance of their family party at Pemberley' (1972:391-92).

The narrator lends tacit approval to Elizabeth's behaviour towards her younger sisters, Mary, Kitty and Lydia. The latter's behaviour Elizabeth justifiably finds intolerable and she makes short shrift of Lydia's request (1972:394) that

Elizabeth persuade Darcy to help Wickham beyond what he already had done at the time of the marriage arrangements. Kitty is by implication largely redeemed by the more sensible influence of her older married sisters, improved by enforced separation from the prime source of her silliness, namely Lydia, and encouraged to spend less time in the company of their equally silly mother (1972:393). Mary, as serious, bookish and pedantic as she is, has less damage to fear from being more frequently in the company of Mrs Bennet on her social rounds (1972:393-94). The narrator is unable to offer her reader a transformed Mrs Bennet, much as she claims she would like to:

I wish I could say, for the sake of her family, that the accomplishment of her earnest desire in the establishment of so many of her children, produced so happy an effect as to make her a sensible, amiable, well-informed woman for the rest of her life; though perhaps it was lucky for her husband, who might not have relished domestic felicity in so unusual a form, that she still was occasionally nervous and invariably silly.

The opportunity to refer with characteristic irony to the rather twisted form of Mr Bennet's 'domestic felicity' is not passed over, and is presumably intended to serve as a reminder to the reader how miserable an imprudent marriage may be:

Mr Bennet missed his second daughter exceedingly; his affection for her drew him oftener from home than any thing else could do. He delighted in going to Pemberley, especially when he was least expected.

(1972:393)

This last paragraph reinforces one's sense of the bond between Mr Bennet and his favourite daughter as one is informed that neither had to forfeit their enjoyment of the other's company

as a consequence of marriage. Mrs Bennet, on the other hand, is finally allowed to disappear from her daughter's life as chief tormentor when it is pointed out that she 'visited Mrs Bingley and talked of Mrs Darcy' (1972:393).

While the details of her family situation are largely revealed directly by action, dialogue and narrative comment, many of the physical details pertaining to Elizabeth are presented from a firmly male perspective, namely Darcy's. What makes Darcy's perspective particularly interesting and more complicated than a more ordinary kind of male regard is that it is most unwillingly bestowed. Elizabeth's power to compel admiration where only reluctance exists is therefore all the more impressive:

Mr Darcy had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty; he had looked at her without admiration at the ball; and when they next met, he looked at her only to criticise. But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that she had hardly a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes. To this discovery succeeded some others equally mortifying. Though he had detected with a critical eye more than one failure of perfect symmetry in her form, he was forced to acknowledge her figure to be light and pleasing; and in spite of his asserting that her manners were not those of the fashionable world, he was caught by their easy playfulness.

(1972:70)

Admiration was surely never more grudgingly given - and, by implication, perhaps seldom more well deserved. Here Darcy is the focalizer, and there is characteristic irony in the narrative position as the male gaze is presented as 'haughty, reserved, and fastidious', the adjectives used by the narrator

to describe Darcy in Chapter Four (1972:64).

Elizabeth is also defined by others during her visit to Jane, ill in bed at Netherfield. Miss Bingley, always as ungenerous as possible when it comes to her rival, describes her action in walking across country in ankle-deep mud to see her sister as showing 'an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country town indifference to decorum', as already noted, while Bingley focuses on the 'affection for her sister that is very pleasing'. Darcy, on being negatively prompted by Miss Bingley, admits only to finding Elizabeth's 'fine eyes' 'brightened by the exercise' (1972:82). Later, however, in conversation with Elizabeth, we discover that he, too, was touched by her affection for her sister when he cites it as proof of 'actual good' (1972:388) in her.

A unique opportunity for self-definition is provided to Elizabeth by Lady Catherine's famous interference when she visits Longbourn with the sole intention of bullying Elizabeth into an agreement never to assent to marrying Darcy. In their confrontation, Elizabeth defines herself without qualms in relation to Darcy himself as follows: '... He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal' (1972:366). She does not hesitate putting herself on a par with a very wealthy and highly respected landowner from the upper échelons of the gentry¹³ and she does this in confrontation with his aristocratic relative. This reveals remarkable self-confidence on the part of a financially unendowed young woman. It is this

kind of self-assertion on the part of a female character that makes the novel fit within a feminist framework.

Regarding the unlikelihood of Elizabeth's being readily dissuaded from marrying Lady Catherine's nephew, the exact terms she uses to Lady Catherine, 'You have widely mistaken my character, if you think I can be worked on by such persuasions as these' (1972:366), seem to anticipate the concerns surrounding the more malleable Anne Elliot of *Persuasion*. Again, Elizabeth reveals remarkable courage in standing up so forcefully and confidently to a woman as influential as Lady Catherine. Elizabeth's confidence is of course in things other than pure rank, namely intelligence, good nature and kindness, none of them qualities Lady Catherine displays. Elizabeth refuses to be intimidated merely by rank and resists forcibly in the face of Lady Catherine's demands. Darcy's initial declaration of his regard for her could only assist Elizabeth in her determination to resist his aunt's coercion. The reader knows from earlier passages that Elizabeth does not readily submit to intimidation.

The end of the chapter further reveals an aspect of Elizabeth's character which may have been concealed until now. It reinforces one's impression of her need for privacy, which has been revealed also in her staying at home rather than accompanying the Collinses to Rosings after Colonel Fitzwilliam's disclosures of Darcy's interference in Jane's relationship with Bingley. In response to Mrs Bennet's

probings regarding the precise motives of Lady Catherine's visit, 'Elizabeth was forced to give into a little falsehood here; for to acknowledge the substance of their conversation was impossible' (1972:368). Clearly to let her mother in on a matter as delicate as this would be unthinkable agony. Despite her general commitment to truth, her need for mental and emotional space to come to terms with the deeper (and ultimately hopeful) implications of Lady Catherine's visit precludes her from answering her mother's questions honestly. Elinor's evasive and discreet replies to Marianne's probing questions in *Sense and Sensibility* and Anne's sense of isolation in the midst of crowds (supposedly constituting happy gatherings of family and friends) in *Persuasion* similarly indicate the need for emotional and mental privacy. This shows a force of character that Lydia Bennet, or Anne's sister, Margaret Musgrove, in *Persuasion*, for instance, would be incapable of. It seems that the more fully developed the woman character, the more this need is portrayed as surfacing.

The overall impression created of Elizabeth is of a complex character who has all the wit and vivacity of a Mary Crawford without the malice.¹⁴ Elizabeth is bright, witty and clever, but occasionally wrong (sufficiently so to enable the reader to identify with her on a purely human level), and utterly likeable. Her self-image is intact until the man she has least designs on proposes to her and by means of his letter turns her self-concept upside down: 'Till this moment I

never knew myself' (1972:237). It takes the shock of Darcy's marriage proposal and the emotional turbulence which ensues to start Elizabeth on a more self-critical and circumspect path towards making a considered marriage commitment.

* * *

The narrative strategies used in presenting the choices faced by young unmarried women are numerous. Four marriages occur during the course of the novel, each one displaying radically different dynamics. The new marriages occur against the backdrop of existing marriages, some obviously harmonious, like the Gardiners', others, like the Bennets', dissonant. An examination of Elizabeth Bennet in relation to her close associates shows how the fictional world with its categories of internal narrators and narratees both echoes and challenges aspects of the 'real' world as it was for single gentrywomen of the day. The use of Elizabeth Bennet as primary focalizer¹⁵ brings the implied reader very close to her point of view. This makes her occasional lapses of awareness all the more intriguing to the reader, who has the advantage of being at the receiving end of an omniscient narrator's commentary. In *Pride and Prejudice*, where the narrator's comments are often ironic and even cynical, where marriage is treated critically, if not sceptically, the text nevertheless moves haltingly yet inexorably towards the 'happy ending' which is marriage.

Elizabeth is typically what Franz Stanzel (and others)¹⁶ would call a 'reflector-character', one 'into whose mind the

reader is admitted or rather forced to enter' (1981:10). The sophisticated narrative strategies used in this process create a psychological intimacy between reader and heroine which enables the narrator to steer not only her central female character but by proxy also her reader towards specific realizations and conclusions. Through the nature of her narrative technique, that is, inviting the reader into the thought-life and emotions of her heroine by means of the free indirect style,¹⁷ Jane Austen enables the reader to experience the world vicariously as it was for young unmarried gentrywomen of the day.

In the first part of the novel the narrator brings her reader closer to Darcy's true feelings than Elizabeth is, as has already been noted. When Sir William Lucas introduces Elizabeth to Darcy as 'a desirable partner' to dance with, the reader has been made aware that by now Darcy has begun 'to wish to know more of her':

Mr Darcy had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty; he had looked at her without admiration at the ball; and when they next met, he looked at her only to criticise. But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that she had hardly a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes. To this discovery succeeded some others equally mortifying. Though he had detected with a critical eye more than one failure of perfect symmetry in her form, he was forced to acknowledge her figure to be light and pleasing; and in spite of his asserting that her manners were not those of the fashionable world, he was caught by their easy playfulness. Of this she was perfectly unaware; - to her he was only the man who made himself agreeable no where, and who had not thought her handsome enough to dance with.

(1972:70)

In this passage it is first Darcy who is the focalizer. The omniscient narrator then comments: 'Of this she was perfectly unaware;' which is then followed by the thoughts of Elizabeth as focalizer. Later on, like Charlotte, the implied reader is encouraged to suspect when assessing Darcy's behaviour 'the effect of love, and the object of that love, her friend Eliza' (1972:214) but one is not at this point made party to his innermost thoughts or feelings. The narrator does not maintain a consistent degree of psychological intimacy with a particular character's thought-life, but focuses on a given character's thoughts selectively and to varying degrees at various stages in the novel, and makes more or less use of 'reflector-characters' (in this instance Charlotte becomes one) depending on the extent to which the narrator wishes to create suspense for her reader. At times the suspense is heightened because one really does not know what the exact nature of the dynamics is. This is the case particularly during one's first reading of the novel. In other instances the discrepancy between what one does know, or at least suspects, and the complete ignorance of the main character (with whom after all the reader is closely allied) increases one's suspense. In the narration of Darcy and Elizabeth's relationship, for instance, there is a wry, witty paragraph in which Elizabeth in her capacity as focalizer is shown to be simultaneously discerning and utterly blind (because so negatively prejudiced):

Elizabeth looked at Darcy to see how cordially he assented to his cousin's praise; but neither at that moment nor at any other could she discern any symptom of love; and from the whole of his behaviour to Miss De Bourgh she derived this comfort for Miss Bingley, that he might have been just as likely to marry *her*, had she been his relation.

(1972:209-10)

The italics humorously highlight the extreme unlikelihood of Darcy's ever being interested in either. Having been primed by Mr Collins as to Lady Catherine's plans for her nephew and her daughter, aware as she is of Miss Bingley's designs on him, her interest is purely clinical and dispassionate.

It is not until the dramatic proposal scene that Elizabeth ever contemplates the possibility of Darcy being interested in her. When Charlotte suggests 'the possibility of his being partial to her, ... Elizabeth always laughed at the idea' (1972:214). The contrast between Elizabeth and Charlotte's points of view, foregrounded by their vastly different receptions of Mr Collins, is subtly reinforced by Charlotte's reflections following Elizabeth's laughing dismissal of her suspicions:

... Mrs Collins did not think it right to press the subject, from the danger of raising expectations which might only end in disappointment; for in her opinion it admitted not of a doubt, that all her friend's dislike would vanish, if she could suppose him to be in her power.

(1972:214)

Charlotte turns out to be totally wrong - at least in the short term¹⁸ - as Elizabeth's furious rejection of Darcy's first marriage proposal proves. Elizabeth 'refuses to respond in the role of passive grateful female', responding instead

'in her own spirit of determined independence' (Tony Tanner, 1972:29). Again, the situation is handled in such a way by the omniscient narrator that the reader is able to enjoy the irony of events more fully than any single character in the novel can. The use of various characters as focalizers provides the reader with the opportunity to surmise more than the individual characters can, and therefore to be better - though not fully - prepared for the crises and climaxes when they occur.

Elizabeth's deliberate tactics of avoiding Darcy and his equally deliberate strategy of seeking her out during their walks at Rosings of course give the reader good reason for sharing Charlotte's suspicions but Elizabeth is far more interested in Darcy's cousin. The hide-and-seek game played between Elizabeth and Darcy extends to encompass the reader who tries to discern the true nature of Darcy's feelings for Elizabeth. The long opening paragraph of Volume II Chapter 10 again presents Elizabeth as focalizer. The gap between her interpretation of events and their 'real' cause could almost cause the reader amusement at Elizabeth's expense. The exasperation evident in phrases like 'the perverseness of the mischance' and 'wilful ill-nature, or a voluntary penance' represents her interpretation of Darcy's encounters with her during her outdoor strolls and are certainly amusing on second reading. But then the explanation she does find (and not such an improbable one at that) for Darcy's expectation that she

would stay at Rosings during her next visit causes her such distress that the reader feels encouraged to empathize with her even in the midst of her confusion. The narrator after all allows one on a first reading to share some of it:

More than once did Elizabeth in her ramble within the Park, unexpectedly meet Mr Darcy. - She felt all the perverseness of the mischance that should bring him where no one else was brought; and to prevent its ever happening again, took care to inform him at first, that it was a favourite haunt of hers. - How it could occur a second time therefore was very odd! - Yet it did, and even a third. It seemed like wilful ill-nature, or a voluntary penance, for on these occasions it was not merely a few formal enquiries and an awkward pause and then away, but he actually thought it necessary to turn back and walk with her. He never said a great deal, nor did she give herself the trouble of talking or of listening much; but it struck her in the course of their third rencontre that he was asking some odd unconnected questions - about her pleasure in being at Hunsford, her love of solitary walks, and her opinion of Mr. and Mrs. Collins's happiness; and that in speaking of Rosings and her not perfectly understanding the house, he seemed to expect that whenever she came into Kent again she would be staying there too. His words seemed to imply it. Could he have Colonel Fitzwilliam in his thoughts? She supposed, if he meant any thing, he must mean an allusion to what might arise in that quarter. It distressed her a little, and she was quite glad to find herself at the gate in the pales opposite the Parsonage.

(1972:215)

The idea that Darcy might be referring to a possible liaison between herself and Colonel Fitzwilliam is shown to 'distress' Elizabeth. Presumably while she believes she would welcome a proposal it seems nebulous to her and potentially embarrassing if the expectation were not to be realized. Here too the use of free indirect style brings the reader very close to Elizabeth's inner world.

It is only *after* the proposal scene that Elizabeth's

changing attitude and changing feelings towards Darcy are gradually depicted - gradually, as this is how the changes occur. The contradictory emotions she experiences are foregrounded. And of course Elizabeth is not the only one to change:

Once Elizabeth and Darcy discover doubts where there had been certainties, once they begin the slow and tentative movement towards new attempts at understanding and communication, they are confronting the dislocations, the possibilities for conflict and confusion that, for the reader, have been amplified and sustained from the start of the novel. Now there are new ways in which we can share their experiences.

(Williams, 1986:76-77)

Darcy's proposal occurs when Elizabeth's antagonism towards him is at its height. 'The agitation and tears' and subsequent headache which Colonel Fitzwilliam's communication about Jane occasioned are followed by activity designed only to reinforce Elizabeth's dislike:

... Elizabeth, as if intending to exasperate herself as much as possible against Mr Darcy, chose for her employment the examination of all the letters which Jane had written to her since her being in Kent.... Mr Darcy's shameful boast of what misery he had been able to inflict, gave her a keener sense of her sister's sufferings.

(1972:220)

Here Elizabeth is again presented as reader,¹⁹ as an incisive narratee, a hostilely critical language analyst, as she studies Jane's letters determined to find Darcy as guilty as possible.

Very importantly, also, on an emotional level, is the fact that at this stage her feelings of attraction, however vague, towards a possible (and eligible)²⁰ future husband are

directed towards another party, namely Colonel Fitzwilliam himself:

She could not think of Darcy's leaving Kent [as consolation], without remembering that his cousin was to go with him; but Colonel Fitzwilliam had made it clear that he had no intentions at all, and agreeable as he was, she did not mean to be unhappy about him.

While settling this point, she was suddenly roused by the sound of the door bell, and her spirits were a little fluttered by the idea of its being Colonel Fitzwilliam himself, who had once before called late in the evening, and might now come to enquire particularly after her.

(1972:220)

In other words, she is shown to be not only full of the intensest dislike of Darcy, who has caused deep hurt to the person she most cares about in the world, namely Jane; she is also emotionally predisposed towards another man whose advances it is suggested on more than one occasion she would welcome. Painstakingly the narrator has therefore depicted the most negative state of mind conceivable for Elizabeth to be in at this moment when Darcy has decided to 'cease struggling' and declare his feelings.

The famous - or infamous - proposal scene brings the narrator to the fore with all the delicacy of expression belonging to an astute but unobtrusive observer:

Elizabeth's astonishment was beyond expression. She stared, coloured, doubted, and was silent. This he considered sufficient encouragement, and the avowal of all that he felt and had long felt for her, immediately followed. He spoke well, but there were feelings besides those of the heart to be detailed, and he was not more eloquent on the subject of tenderness than of pride. His sense of her inferiority - of its being a degradation - of the family obstacles which judgment had always opposed to inclination, were dwelt on with a warmth which seemed due to the consequence he was wounding, but was very

unlikely to recommend his suit.

(1972:221)

In this paragraph there are three perspectives being presented. The first is 'Elizabeth's astonishment'. The second, Darcy's perspective, is skilfully portrayed through the use of indirectly reported speech which suggests even the rhythms expressing his hesitations and reservations. The free indirect style is at work here and the narrator is 'borrowing' Darcy's own vocabulary at this point: '[h]is sense of her inferiority - of its being a degradation - of the family obstacles which judgment had always opposed to inclination'. These phrases enable the reader to get a fairly clear idea of Darcy's sense of his own position; of those impediments to his regard for Elizabeth that caused his grave silences and general lack of cheerfulness while getting to know her. His positive regard (the word 'tenderness' is used but only in juxtaposition to 'pride') is skirted around rather than dwelt on, the emphasis clearly on 'feelings *besides* those of the heart' (my italics). The third perspective provided is the very reasonable and gently ironic one of the narrator: Darcy's objections are said to be described with 'a warmth which seemed due to the consequence he was wounding, but was very unlikely to recommend his suit'. The description of the interchange between Darcy and Elizabeth is done in terms which indicate respect for the seriousness of the occasion and the depth of the very mixed emotions involved - ranging from love and admiration to anger, contempt, hurt and disappointment,

'mingled incredulity and mortification' (1972:224) - though even here a wry, amused smile on the part of the narrator at the seemingly impassable gulf separating the would-be lovers is not that hard to imagine.

Towards the end of the chapter, after Darcy has 'hastily left the room ... and quit the house', the narrator resumes her more usual posture of veiled irony (more explicit on later readings of the novel as the reader is then aware of the 'truth' about Wickham). She fully represents Elizabeth's point of view, who is herself a character who has only partial knowledge. The penultimate paragraph of the chapter begins with an omniscient - and not unsympathetic - presentation of Elizabeth. It then moves into a more subjective account²¹ of Elizabeth's mistaken - or at least partially mistaken - suppositions:

The tumult of her mind was now painfully great. She knew not how to support herself, and from actual weakness sat down and cried for half an hour. Her astonishment, as she reflected on what had passed, was increased by every review of it. That she should receive an offer of marriage from Mr Darcy! that he should have been in love with her for so many months! so much in love as to wish to marry her in spite of all the objections which had made him prevent his friend's marrying her sister, and which must appear at least with equal force in his own case, was almost incredible! it was gratifying to have inspired unconsciously so strong an affection. But his pride, his abominable pride, his shameless avowal of what he had done with respect to Jane, his unpardonable assurance in acknowledging, though he could not justify it, and the unfeeling manner in which he had mentioned Mr Wickham, his cruelty towards whom he had not attempted to deny, soon overcame the pity which the consideration of his attachment had for a moment excited.

(1972:224-25)

The exclamations in free indirect style again give a sense of

her astonishment, and the last sentence a sense of her misguided suppositions.

The following chapter, devoted almost entirely to Darcy's letter of explanation, gives the lengthiest uninterrupted opportunity to any character in the novel for self-revelation. Here Darcy functions as internal narrator, and Elizabeth (whose response is depicted in the chapter succeeding the letter) is again the narratee, as she was when Wickham turned his charm on her and spun his deceptive yarn at Mrs Philips's supper party. The striking difference is that Darcy is a reliable narrator, whereas Wickham is singularly unreliable - despite the 'truth in his looks' that Elizabeth (who was anything but objective) claims to have perceived. Although Elizabeth dates her change in attitude towards Darcy to the moment of her first seeing Pemberley in her humorous and somewhat evasive response to Jane's incredulous question, it appears more precisely to stem from the light of her reflections on rereading Darcy's letter. Her first reading proceeds '[w]ith a strong prejudice against every thing he might say':

She read, with an eagerness which hardly left her power of comprehension, and from impatience of knowing what the next sentence might bring, was incapable of attending to the sense of the one before her eyes. His belief of her sister's insensibility, she instantly resolved to be false, and his account of the real, the worst objections to the match, made her too angry to have any wish of doing him justice. He expressed no regret for what he had done which satisfied her; his style was not penitent, but haughty. It was all pride and insolence.

(1972:233)

Elizabeth is shown here to be entirely subjective, and free indirect style is again used towards the end of the passage cited to indicate her condemnatory attitude towards Darcy's explanation and attempt at partial justification with regard to his interference in the relationship between Bingley and Jane. The situation pertaining to Wickham is more complex:

But when this subject was succeeded by his account of Mr Wickham, when she read with somewhat clearer attention, a relation of events, which, if true, must overthrow every cherished opinion of his worth, and which bore so alarming an affinity to his own history of himself, her feelings were yet more acutely painful and more difficult of definition.

(1972:233)

Despite her 'protesting that she would not regard it [the letter], that she would never look in it again', it appears that it is in the very muddle of these feelings that her changing, more complex and open response to Darcy begins. Thus, despite her firm resolution to dislike Darcy,²² from the time of receiving Darcy's proposal and letter of explanation, Elizabeth is in the position of reassessing her own behaviour, judgments, feelings and opinions concerning him.²³ The reader, as interpreter of words on a page, now joins with Elizabeth as reader of Darcy's letter in her role as language analyst.²⁴

Towards the end of the novel, Elizabeth has recognized the nature of her own feelings for Darcy - just as, after much destructive tampering with the gullible heart of her friend Harriet Smith, Emma realizes that 'Mr Knightley must marry no-one but herself'. Elizabeth formulates her change of mind and heart in the following terms:

She began now to comprehend that he was exactly the man, who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her. His understanding and temper, though unlike her own, would have answered all her wishes. It was an union that must have been to the advantage of both; by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softenend, his manners improved, and from his judgment, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance.

(1972:325)

No character has as much access to the information made available by the narrator as the implied reader - though even here there are lacunae resulting from the omniscient narrator's prerogative selectively to withhold information.²⁵

Another reassessment occurs when both Darcy and Elizabeth, now privately engaged, mutually examine the first proposal scene, evaluating themselves (negatively) as speakers and actors, and each reassures the other concerning the legitimacy of his/her individual reactions at the time. As they repeat exact phrases ('Your reproof, so well applied, I shall never forget: "had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner"' [1972:376]) and analyse beginnings and endings of letters ('The letter, perhaps, began in bitterness, but it did not end so. The adieu is charity itself' [1972:377]), they, as a couple, are involved in analytical activity similar to the reader of the novel. The latter presumably trod a comparable path at the time of originally reading the chapter presenting the first proposal as well as the subsequent one containing Darcy's letter of explanation. Williams draws attention to the rather disconcerting privilege the reader has in being given insight into 'the workings of both minds' (with reference to

Darcy and Elizabeth):

because the characters are changing and developing, the instability is perpetuated we are actually made less secure as they [Darcy and Elizabeth] move towards a resolution, each in humility and doubt and embarrassment, they also do so with as anxious an expediency as even Charlotte Lucas would have approved they are trying to fix and stabilise at least some part of a meaning that has hitherto been fleeting and changing for reader and character alike.

(1986:69-70)

Particularly in analysing and reassessing the original proposal scene it is as though the reader shares in the very process the characters are engaged in, as they attempt to unravel whether wrongs were real and/or imagined, deserved and/or undeserved. This occurs as they strive to take blame where they are guilty, and exonerate the other where they can. As Elizabeth puts it, 'We will not quarrel for the greater share of blame annexed to that evening The conduct of neither, if strictly examined, will be irreproachable; but since then, we have both, I hope, improved in civility' (1972:376).

Darcy is encouraged by Elizabeth to '[t]hink only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure' (1972:377). This kind of willingness to compromise is a far cry from the first proposal scene when they could only insult and injure each other. This is clearly the happy denouement the narrator had in mind when taking the part of an interested onlooker and not participating in the turmoil of the estranged couple in the original proposal scene.

In the novels of Jane Austen there seems to be a tension between the cynicism often prevalent in the direct narrative commentary on marriage and the movement of the plot towards marriage as the inevitable conclusion. The presentation of various marriages throughout the novels highlights the importance of compatibility between partners. Indirectly, therefore, the need to make an informed choice is underlined, as are the hazards of a careless choice. The abdication of the right to choose or of the responsibility to choose *for oneself*²⁶ also results in grave repercussions, or at least the threat of them.

On the subject of marriage Jane Austen's views are complex. In a letter to Fanny Knight Jane Austen describes the kind of delight which comes from an intimate understanding and appreciation of the way an 'other' functions when she revels in the emotional intimacy existing between herself and her niece. In its entirety the paragraph reads:

You are inimitable, irresistable. You are the delight of my Life. Such Letters, such entertaining Letters as you have lately sent! Such a description of your queer little heart! Such a lovely display of what Imagination does. You are worth your weight in Gold, or even in the new Silver Coinage. I cannot express to you what I have felt in reading your history of yourself, how full of Pity & Concern & Admiration & Amusement I have been. You are the Paragon of all that is Silly & Sensible, common-place & eccentric, Sad & Lively, Provoking & Interesting. Who can keep pace with the fluctuations of your Fancy, the Capprizios of your Taste, the Contradictions of your Feelings? You are so odd! - & all the time, so perfectly natural - so peculiar in yourself, & yet so like everybody else! *It is very, very gratifying to me to know you so intimately.* You can hardly think what a pleasure it is to me, to have such thorough pictures of your Heart. Oh! what a loss it will be when you are married.

You are too agreeable in your single state, too agreeable as a Neice. I shall hate you when your delicious play of Mind is all settled down into conjugal & maternal affections.

(1817; my italics; R.W. Chapman, ed., 1979:478-79)

Although ostensibly expressing herself as a selfish aunt, Jane Austen very evidently displays ambivalence about marriage and its effect on the mental alertness of the female partner. Her fears that Fanny will go the vacuous way of many childbearing wives before her are expressed humourously but were nonetheless real for all that. Perhaps the last sentence is in fact intended as a warning to Fanny not to allow her 'delicious play of Mind' to be swallowed up by domesticity. Her personal sense of loss at the possible future absence of stimulating interaction with her niece is related to the narrower and more practical and mundane focus implied in the phrase 'settled down into conjugal & maternal affections'. From her personal correspondence here and elsewhere²⁷ one learns that despite the happy endings of her six novels, marriage for Jane Austen was a perilous affair. The texts themselves provide further examples of the misery produced by mismatches. Marriages such as those of the Gardiners in *Pride and Prejudice* or the Crofts in *Persuasion* are outnumbered by couples like the Parkers in *Sense and Sensibility*, and the Bennets and the Collinses in *Pride and Prejudice*. Part of the pleasure of reading each novel is watching the unfolding of the plot. Each plot consists of the heroine more or less narrowly escaping an unhappy - or ill-fated - match in favour

of a good one, promising happiness and success based on compatibility of character and adequate finance. Each novel moves towards the desired end while resolving difficulties and clearing obstacles along the way. The suspense and interest lie in how the difficulties will be overcome, and only to a lesser extent, in the question of whether they will be overcome.

The marriage which receives the most attention in *Pride and Prejudice* is of course the Bennets'. While Mrs Bennet is largely a caricature, however realistic her concern to marry off her daughters may be, Mr Bennet is a more complex character altogether. Interestingly, while Mr Bennet comes in for very severe criticism later in the novel, in the early stages his wit, humour, irony, values, partiality for Elizabeth and disdain for Mrs Bennet seem to coincide fairly closely with the narrator's views. His assessment of his five daughters (barring the possibility that he undervalues Jane) seems to approximate the narrator's.

Another respect in which Mr Bennet resembles the narrator is in his preference to keep his closest relatives in the dark regarding his movements. Chapter Two, for instance, begins:

Mr Bennet was among the earliest of those who waited on Mr Bingley. He had always intended to visit him, though to the last always assuring his wife that he should not go; and till the evening after the visit was paid, she had no knowledge of it. It was then disclosed in the following manner. Observing his second daughter employed in trimming a hat, he suddenly addressed her with, 'I hope Mr Bingley will like it Lizzy.'

(1972:54)

As already indicated, particularly with regard to the exact nature of Darcy's feelings for Elizabeth, for instance, the narrator does not always give full expression to her omniscient prerogative; she keeps even her reader guessing. This has a parallel in the behaviour of Mr Bennet. Later in the same chapter, he is said to leave the room, 'fatigued with the raptures of his wife' (1972:55). At this point, seemingly begging for narrative intervention, the narrator is actually restrained. This is perhaps the kind of instance Barbara Hardy has in mind when she commends Austen for her authorial restraint.²⁸ The reader is thus left - after that brief but sharp reminder of Mr Bennet's misery in marriage - to dwell on the extent of the lack of compatibility and the resulting discomfort:

Mr Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. *Her* mind was less difficult to develope. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news.
(1972:53)

The italicised '*her*' prepares us for the damning negative comparison which follows. Such brutal jabs characterize the presentation of the Bennets' (dis)union.

While the narrator and Elizabeth have in common with Mr Bennet their enjoyment of 'ridicul[ing] ... [f]ollies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies', Elizabeth is also used to highlight her father's flaws, his own character defects, as

in the example provided below. Here the limitations of the Bennets' marriage are again made explicit - this time in the free indirect style in which she [the narrator] shares commentary with her characters' (Hardy, 1975:36), here via Elizabeth's thoughts:

Had Elizabeth's opinion been all drawn from her own family, she could not have formed a very pleasing picture of conjugal felicity or domestic comfort. Her father captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour, which youth and beauty generally give, had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind, had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her. Respect, esteem, and confidence, had vanished for ever; and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown. But Mr Bennet was not of a disposition to seek comfort for the disappointment which his own imprudence had brought on, in any of those pleasures which too often console the unfortunate for their folly or their vice. He was fond of the country and of books; and from these tastes had arisen his principal enjoyments. To his wife he was very little otherwise indebted, than as her ignorance and folly had contributed to his amusement....

Elizabeth, however, had never been blind to the impropriety of her father's behaviour as a husband. She had always seen it with pain; but ... she endeavoured to forget what she could not overlook, and to banish from her thoughts that continual breach of conjugal obligation and decorum which, in exposing his wife to the contempt of her own children, was so highly reprehensible.

(1972:262)

The seriousness of the tone here, especially in the latter paragraph, as the narrator moves closer to Elizabeth's own perceptions through her use of free indirect narration, conveys severe censure, yet Mr Bennet's plight is never wholly unsympathetically depicted.²⁹ Mr Bennet's lack of responsible parental involvement is censured without total condemnation of himself. The mismatch in which Mr Bennet is trapped does not leave one unmoved - though ironically enough, it is probably

the greatest source of comedy in the novel. Indeed, his inappropriate jibes and jokes could be viewed as sometimes desperate attempts to survive uncongenial circumstances.

Mr Bennet perhaps expresses himself with most passion when speaking to Elizabeth about her proposed marriage to Darcy:

'... But let me advise you to think better of it. I know your disposition, Lizzy. I know that you could be neither happy nor respectable, unless you truly esteemed your husband; unless you looked up to him as a superior. Your lively talents would place you in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage. You could scarcely escape discredit and misery. My child, let me not have the grief of seeing you unable to respect your partner in life. You know not what you are about.'

(1972:385)

The use of italics draws attention to the affinity Mr Bennet feels with *only* this member of his family and his dread lest she might in some form, in any form whatsoever, repeat his own mistake. The paragraph which follows this one, containing as it does a single sentence, suggests the impassioned nature of Elizabeth's response to her father. At moments of great emotional intensity the free indirect style is used. Here, too, this is the case:

Elizabeth, still more affected, was earnest and solemn in her reply; and at length, by repeated assurances that Mr Darcy was really the object of her choice, by explaining the gradual change which her estimation of him had undergone; relating her absolute certainty that his affection was not the work of a day, but had stood the test of many months suspense, and enumerating with energy all his good qualities, she did conquer her father's incredulity, and reconcile him to the match.

Even then Mr Bennet's response is subdued and Elizabeth's place as his favourite subtly reaffirmed::

'Well, my dear,' said he, when she ceased speaking, 'I have no more to say. If this be the case, he deserves you. I could not have parted with you, my Lizzy, to any one less worthy.'

(1972:385)

The point that is clearly made in this interchange between Elizabeth and her father is that marriage can be a most miserable affair. While it has already been comically conveyed to the reader that his marriage to Mrs Bennet is a disunion rather than a union, where the greatest advantage he derives from her is her power to amuse him without even being conscious of the fact, the point is here more seriously made.

On breaking the news of her proposed marriage to Darcy, Elizabeth naturally has a far less intimate and less rewarding interaction with her mother. Her initial reaction 'was most extraordinary; ... Mrs Bennet sat quite still, and unable to utter a syllable' (1972:386). Soon enough, however, her mother is characteristically vocal and vacuous, planning to prepare her future son-in-law, worth '[t]en thousand a year, and very likely more', his favourite dish

This was a sad omen of what her mother's behaviour to the gentleman himself might be; and Elizabeth found, that though in the certain possession of his warmest affection, and secure of her relations' consent, there was still something to be wished for.

(1972:386-87)

While the endings of Jane Austen's novels may seem to idealise possibilities (the heroine *does* always end up with the most eligible gentleman on the scene), the narrator inserts these jabbing reminders of the pains and irritations present in 'real life', frequently in the inescapable facts of

the undesirable behaviour of parents and occasionally siblings.³⁰ This ensures a realistic dimension to the endings and avoids over-romanticising.³¹

Lydia's behaviour represents one of the most overt displays of sexuality in all of Jane Austen's fiction. Her act of eloping with the disreputable Wickham is shown to have less disastrous consequences in this 'light, and bright, and sparkling work'³² than is clearly suggested were probable had it not been for the intervention of Darcy. While the coercion of Wickham into marriage with Lydia saves her from the enduring nature of the scandal of her elopement with Wickham, their lifestyle does not bode well for future happiness. As Elizabeth reasons, 'neither rational happiness nor worldly prosperity, could be justly expected for her sister'

(1972:321):

How Wickham and Lydia were to be supported in tolerable independence, she could not imagine. But how little of permanent happiness could belong to a couple who were only brought together because their passions were stronger than their virtue, she could easily conjecture.

(1972:325)

Later chapters confirm the rightness of Elizabeth's surmises, thus confirming the narrator's endorsement of courtship as an important prelude to marital stability and contentment.

The Collinses' marriage functions best with least conversation between husband and wife. On her way to visit the Collinses in Kent, Elizabeth describes Mr Collins to her aunt as 'a man who has not one agreeable quality, who has neither manner nor sense to recommend him' (1972:189). Within the

short span of their married life Charlotte seems to have devised strategies for coping with her unamiable partner's frequent lapses:

When Mr Collins said any thing of which his wife might reasonably be ashamed, which certainly was not unseldom, she [Elizabeth] involuntarily turned her eye on Charlotte. Once or twice she could discern a faint blush; but in general Charlotte wisely did not hear.... When Mr Collins could be forgotten, there was really a great air of comfort throughout, and by Charlotte's evident enjoyment of it, Elizabeth supposed he must be often forgotten.

(1972:192)

Elizabeth at first had rather wondered that Charlotte should not prefer the dining parlour for common use; it was a better sized room, and had a pleasanter aspect; but she soon saw that her friend had an excellent reason for what she did, for Mr Collins would undoubtedly have been much less in his own apartment, had they sat in one equally lively; and she gave Charlotte credit for the arrangement.

(1972:202)

Such remarks confirm one's original view of this relationship, that expediency was the primary factor motivating both parties. Neither their happiness nor their communication can ever be more than superficial.

The marriages which are presented positively by the narrator are the Gardiners', the Bingleys' and the Darcys'. The Gardiners are presented as responsible, compatible, enjoying an affectionate relationship with their young children (1972:302), and a warm relationship with their two eldest nieces, Jane and Elizabeth. Between themselves there is warmth, caring, mutual respect and a healthy interdependence, suggesting the joy of mutuality and intimacy possible in a good marriage.

Jane Bennet and Charles Bingley have the same type of pleasant good nature that is slow to offend or take offence: 'Elizabeth really believed all his expectations of felicity, to be rationally founded, because they had for basis the excellent understanding, and super-excellent disposition of Jane, and a general similarity of feeling and taste between her and himself' (1972:357). Their marital home is presented as a refuge for the nervous Mrs Bennets, giddy Lydias and Catherines, and irresponsible Wickhams of this world. One notices almost with relief, however, that even Bingley's good humour has (rather elastic) limits: with reference to the Wickhams, 'they both of them frequently staid so long, that even Bingley's good humour was overcome, and he proceeded so far as to talk of giving them a hint to be gone' (1972:395). But the reader easily deduces that no real threat to their happiness occurs.

The rather unusual courting relationship of Elizabeth and Darcy has been explored at some length above. Suffice it to say of their marriage that Elizabeth's realization that 'he [Darcy] had yet to learn to be laught at, and it was rather too early to begin' (1972:380) gave way in marriage to a 'lively, sportive, manner of talking to her brother' which initially alarmed and astonished Georgiana Darcy:

He, who had always inspired in herself [i.e., his sister] a respect which almost overcame her affection, she now saw the object of open pleantry.... By Elizabeth's instructions she began to comprehend that a woman may take liberties with her husband, which a brother will not

always allow in a sister more than ten years younger than himself.

(1972:395)

The impression created is of relaxation, laughter, enjoyment and ease, with hints of Darcy under Elizabeth's influence losing the rather inflexible, disagreeable attitude formerly displayed. Elizabeth's freedom of spirit and the effects of her union with Darcy hardly suggest in my opinion a (Congrevian) case of 'marriage requir[ing] her by degrees to dwindle into a wife' (Judith Lowder-Newton, 1981:84).

Marriage in the novel is thus presented as either a harmonious haven, providing the opportunity for growth and mutual support, or a trap in which what has become antipathetic company has to be barely tolerated or avoided as far as possible - this occurs with the Bennets and the Collinses. If there is any one factor that can help avoid a mismatch, it would seem to be due regard for the importance of courtship. Unsuccessful marriages such as the Bennets' or the Wickhams' invariably include haste as a component of the decision-making process. Throughout Jane Austen's novels courtship is encouraged as the means to a happy decision and outcome. An aspect of this is the recognition on the part of the woman that she too is responsible for her choice; that she in fact does have the prerogative to refuse; and that the character of the man she marries will have a considerable influence on her happiness. The snares for a woman of falling for a man solely on account of wealth and position or because

of his attractive appearance and/or charm are stressed, as are the dangers of a man's marrying a silly woman on account of a pretty face.

* * *

In *Pride and Prejudice* the reader is asked to recognize the exigencies faced by the Bennet girls and by Charlotte Lucas.³³ To that degree one is invited to sympathize with Mrs Bennet's anxiety. Yet the foolishness of Mrs Bennet is depicted so explicitly that it is impossible for the reader to identify with her; an ironic distance is thereby created between the character of Mrs Bennet and the reader.

As in *Sense and Sensibility*, the question of the entail highlights the way women were discriminated against financially purely on the grounds of their sex. The narrator employs Mrs Bennet in two ways: firstly, her lack of understanding of the way an entail functions is ridiculed (1972:170-71, 178, 255); but secondly, and perhaps more interestingly, the narrator uses Mrs Bennet's perpetual harping on the subject to indicate her own perennial concern about the way women are typically disadvantaged in the period:

Mr Bennet's property consisted almost entirely in an estate of two thousand a year, which, unfortunately for his daughters, was entailed in default of heirs male, on a distant relation ...

(1972:75)

Mr Bennet in his characteristically unfeeling tone presents the reality of the situation in the following brutal terms:

Mr Collins, ... when I am dead, may turn you all out of this

house as soon as he pleases'. To this his wife replies, with her usual lack of insight: 'I do think it is the hardest thing in the world, that your estate should be entailed away from your own children; and I am sure if I had been you, I should have tried long ago to do something or other about it':

Jane and Elizabeth attempted to explain to her the nature of an entail. They had often attempted it before, but it was a subject on which Mrs Bennet was beyond the reach of reason; and she continued to rail bitterly against the cruelty of settling an estate away from a family of five daughters, in favour of a man whom nobody cared anything about.

(1972:106-07)

At another point the narrator indirectly endorses Mr Bennet's upbraiding of himself for being less than prudent in his provision for his daughters but of course not with regard to the question of the entail, which is entirely beyond his jurisdiction:

Mr Bennet had very often wished, before this period of his life, that, instead of spending his whole income, he had laid by an annual sum, for the better provision of his children, and of his wife, if she survived him. He now³⁴ wished it more than ever.

(1972:322)

On the strength of his being the prospective heir of Longbourn Mr Collins proclaims confidently to his cousin Elizabeth in the course of his proposal:

My situation in life, my connections with the family of De Bourgh, and my relationship to your own, are circumstances highly in my favour; and you should take it into farther consideration that in spite of your manifold attractions, it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made you. Your portion is unhappily so small that it will in all likelihood undo the effects of your loveliness and amiable qualifications.

(1972:150)

As she does in the case of Mrs Bennet, the narrator ridicules Mr Collins. Yet, implicit in this absurdly pompous and arrogant address, is a grain of truth to which the narrator may be more sensitive than Elizabeth is as affronted cousin, resentful of Mr Collins's expectation that she be grateful for an entirely unsolicited proposal, not altogether unlike Darcy's couched in politely insulting terms. Elizabeth confidently and indignantly turns down Mr Collins's proposal; the narrator has however ensured that the reader has a clear picture of Elizabeth's lack of financial prospects.

While Barbara Hardy argues that none of Austen's heroines is as adventurous as Austen herself in the sense of being a writer, one needs to bear in mind that this was - at least initially - a secret outlet for her energies, critical insights and sometimes sardonic observations. Lowder-Newton, on the other hand, implies an element of wish fulfilment on Austen's part in terms of the rather different world inhabited by Elizabeth. Elizabeth takes risks which are shown to be bold and hazardous. Lowder-Newton suggests a contrast between Austen's own world as novelist and the fictional world Austen creates for Elizabeth:

Elizabeth's world, in contrast to Austen's, permits her something more than spiritual victories, permits her more than that sense of autonomy which comes with wittily observing the confinements of one's situation, with standing apart from them in spirit while having to bend to them in daily behaviour. It permits her not only the energetic expression of but also the forceful use of those critical energies which Austen herself diverted into novels ...

Elizabeth is thus regarded as acting out an Austen fantasy in the sense of not bending to conventional expectations (her mother's and Lady Catherine's, for example) and ultimately being *rewarded* (with 'a man, a carriage, and £10,000 a year') rather than punished. Lowder-Newton suggests that Jane Austen creates for Elizabeth a world in which the risks she takes in turning down not only Collins but Darcy as well are shown to pay off. Lowder-Newton contends that Elizabeth is in fact 'a fantasy of power':

Real power in *Pride and Prejudice*, as is often observed, involves having the intelligence, the wit, and the critical attitudes of Jane Austen; and Elizabeth Bennet, as it is also sometimes observed, is essentially an Austen fantasy, a fantasy of power.

(1981:73)

Lowder-Newton's rather dubious argument is that the 'fantasy' of Elizabeth is held in place by the more ideal world she is made to inhabit in *Pride and Prejudice* in contrast to the 'real' one inhabited by her creator. This seems to me to be underplaying the very real possibilities for an evil outcome in the novel, possibilities which Mrs Bennet's (admittedly somewhat hysterical) comments never allow the reader to lose sight of for long.

While Lowder-Newton explores the contrasts between Jane Austen's own world and the fictional world she creates for her heroine, it is also revealing to explore the overlaps in character and personality. Various other critics (including Douglas Bush and Hardy)³⁵ have also pointed out the similarities between Jane Austen and the type of character she

creates in Elizabeth. Bush, for instance, sees Elizabeth's comments that she finds 'intricate characters ... the most amusing' and her admission to being diverted by 'follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies' as enunciations of 'Jane Austen's fictional principles' and 'the lighter side of [her] satirical creed' (1975:105), thus suggesting less of a contrast between Elizabeth and Austen and more of identification.

Another character whose relationship to the narrator bears examining is Charlotte Lucas, particularly with regard to Austen's presentation of the options faced by women of her day. In a dry, factual tone the narrator presents 'Miss Lucas's scheme' (1972:162) to get herself married to Mr Collins. The narrator is poised between presenting the reader with her own clear-sighted view of Charlotte's machinations and Elizabeth's honest response to her friend's decision. While Lowder-Newton regards the narrator's position as an ambivalent one, this view does not seem tenable to me. It seems to me rather that the exigencies facing Charlotte are presented with absolute lucidity but that the more highly principled stance of Elizabeth is endorsed, however idealistic it may be. Regarding the speed with which the transaction was arranged, the narrator's dry comment is that 'Miss Lucas, who accepted him solely from the pure and disinterested desire of an establishment, cared not how soon that establishment were gained.' Referring to Charlotte's brothers, the reader is

pointedly informed that 'the boys were relieved from their apprehension of Charlotte's dying an old maid' because of the inevitable financial burden this would place on them.

Charlotte's own reflections are described in the following unromantic terms:

Mr Collins to be sure was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband. - Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; *it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want.* This preservative she had now obtained; at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it.

(My emphasis; 1972:163)

The italicized section, it seems to me, contains the endorsement of the narrator as it shows how their context of dependency may encourage single women to make personal happiness subservient to economic considerations when contemplating marriage. Charlotte indeed is confronted with the choice between seizing her opportunity - at no-one's expense - or continuing as a burden to her parents and ultimately to her brothers - except in the highly unlikely event of an equally suitable and more attractive match than Mr Collins presenting himself (an event which Charlotte knows she would be foolish to expect). Tanner reflects on Charlotte's decision to marry Collins in the following sympathetic and uncritical way: 'Charlotte is only doing what the economic realities of her society - as Jane Austen makes abundantly clear - all but force her to do' (1972:37-38). Lowder-Newton,

on the other hand, avoids taking a clear stand herself with the claim that 'ultimately the narrator abandons us to ambivalence':

If we see Charlotte with irony, we see Elizabeth with irony too ... The Charlotte Lucas episode, on the whole, is left to suggest, on the one hand, the perverting force of women's economic lot and to prevent us, on the other, from feeling that force as a reality in the universe of Elizabeth Bennet.

As already suggested earlier, it does not seem possible to me to have it both ways. The narrator presents Charlotte's motives with a clear eye; societal pressures (because of her age, and her plainness, among other factors) do not permit Charlotte to indulge in the luxury of the type of romantic inclinations Elizabeth is prone to with regard to Wickham, for instance. But Elizabeth's romantic indulgence is shown to carry very real risks of its own. She could either end up unhappy in an imprudent marriage (as Lydia does); or she could forfeit the opportunity to marry altogether, and thereby be a financial burden to her family.

This brings us to another type of option faced by women: namely which kind of relationship to choose - or perhaps one should rather say trust - as a basis for marriage. 'Falling in love', particularly at first sight, is viewed with suspicion. Of the change in Elizabeth's attitude towards Darcy, the narrator writes:

If gratitude and esteem are good foundations of affection, Elizabeth's change of sentiment will be neither improbable nor faulty. But if otherwise, if the regard springing from such sources is unreasonable or unnatural, in comparison of what is so often described as

arising on a first interview with its object, and even before two words have been exchanged, nothing can be said in her defence, except that she had given somewhat of a trial to the latter method, in her partiality for Wickham, and that its ill-success might perhaps authorize her to seek the other less interesting mode of attachment.

(1972:296)

This is as strongly persuasive a tone as the narrator in *Pride and Prejudice* ever uses. Using Elizabeth as her example, with respect to both Wickham and Darcy, the narrator steers the reader as it were from one 'method' to another. Courtship, or 'getting to know' the other person - through studying them, their conversation, actions and behaviour, and forming a carefully considered character assessment - is clearly recommended as a far safer 'mode of attachment' than the passion and impulsiveness prevalent in Wickham and Lydia's relationship.

What emerges in this chapter is that there is a tension between the direct narrative commentary - often very cynical on the subject of marriage - and the movement of the plot towards the *telos* which is marriage. The role of the embedded narratives, for example, Wickham's and Darcy's, is to contribute in various ways to the light in which one reads the direct narrative commentary and to the way in which the resolution is perceived.

Elizabeth refuses to bow to convention, which is stereotypically presented by the caricature of Mrs Bennet, her mother, when she turns down her cousin Mr Collins's proposal. She goes even further when she astounds Mr Darcy, still

struggling to overcome his sense of 'degradation' in making an inferior connection, when she refuses his arrogant proposal of marriage. When she finally accepts him, it is only after she has made the gradual discovery that he is indispensable to her own happiness. The heroine's insistence on the right to be happy, alongside her consistent refusal to be made unhappy by the agendas of others, is a feminist statement. The structure of the plot vindicates this desire to exercise her own choices in what is to constitute her own happiness. Narration is therefore a feminist strategy in this novel.

ENDNOTES

1. As 'Henry' puts it in Roger Gard's chapter on *Pride and Prejudice*, 'We know from then on that we're to encounter and explore a minefield of subversible *cliché* in both the art of this novel and the life of its characters' (1992:114).
2. Charlotte Lucas, for instance, is seen to consider herself relatively fortunate to have found a husband as late in life as twenty-seven and to have her family so respectably rid of her.
3. Mrs Bennet feels Mrs Lucas, for example, to be her competitor. Charlotte herself is seen to have as pragmatic a view of marriage as Mrs Bennet's own.
4. A helpful exposition of the narrative layering involved when irony is at work reads as follows:

Irony is always the result of a disparity of understanding. In any situation in which one person knows or perceives more - or less - than another, irony must be either actually or potentially present. In any example of narrative art there are, broadly speaking, three points of view - those of the characters, the narrator, and the audience. As narrative becomes more sophisticated, a fourth point of view is added by the development of a clear distinction between the narrator and the author. Narrative irony is a function of disparity among these three or four viewpoints. And narrative artists have always been ready to employ this disparity to make effects of various kinds.

(Robert Scholes & Robert Kellogg, 1966:240)

5. Emma is even more made the object of satire, when her illusions are presented by means of focalization and dupe not only herself but also the first-time reader. An example of this would be her (mis)perception that Mr Elton is in love with Harriet.

Both Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* and Emma in *Emma* view themselves as infallible judges of other people's characters, motives and thoughts but make blatant mistakes with regard to Mr Wickham and Mr Elton respectively. Elizabeth and Emma are taken aback by the subsequent behaviour of these gentlemen while the reader is sufficiently familiar with the heroines' perspectives to sympathize without necessarily sharing the humiliation of having been duped.

6. I find Rachel Brownstein's interpretation of the use of irony by Austen somewhat extreme:

Courtship as power play is the subject of all Austen's novels; playing with - or against - power is the substance of them. And through irony, by pointing to the limits of definitive and assertive language, Jane Austen suggests a powerful and pleasurable relation women in patriarchy may have to discursive authority.

(1988:57-58)

In a recent work on irony, Linda Hutcheon comments:

...irony is a discursive strategy that depends on context and on the identity and position of both the ironist and the audience. So a feminist critic, writing in a book about women and comedy, can begin an article entitled 'Jane Austen: Irony and Authority' with: 'It is a truth universally acknowledged, right now, that language is involved in giving and taking both power and pleasure' (Brownstein, 1988:57) and expect her readers (themselves self-selected and having at least read her title) will understand both the allusion to the opening of *Pride and Prejudice* and the irony.

(1994:194-95)

The layers (and possible distortions) are multiple.

7. Charlotte, a character presented as lucid and articulate, though one whose views are occasionally in marked tension with those of the implied author and of the heroine, feels certain that Elizabeth's dislike of Darcy would rapidly dwindle should she know him to be 'in her power' (1972:214).

8. In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine has to learn to read more discriminatingly. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne has to realize that despite Willoughby's shared enthusiasm for Shakespeare's sonnets, 'impediments' are not easily overcome. In *Mansfield Park*, reading provides the opportunity for Edward and Fanny to develop a strong mental and emotional affinity. In *Emma*, Emma's lack of discipline is suggested by the reading lists which are made but not acted upon. In *Persuasion*, Anne through her conversations with Captain Benwick helps draw him into a frame of mind where he can turn the lively Louisa Musgrove into a receptive listener and loving wife.

9. In *Sense and Sensibility* the unique characteristics of each sister come to the fore in contrast to the other; and one cannot but compare Emma Woodhouse and Anne Elliot to their somewhat less attractive sisters.

10. According to Marvin Mudrick, 'Jane believes good of everyone, not out of any rational or intuitive knowledge beyond Elizabeth's, but out of a total incapacity to accept the possibility of evil until it quite bluntly proclaims

itself':

She is a good person because she is by nature too easy and temperate to be otherwise. The difference between her natural, uncomplex, unintuitive, almost unseeing goodness and Elizabeth's conscious, reasoned, perpetual examination into motive - this is a difference not merely between individuals, but between altogether different orders of mind.

(1952:105)

This confirms Mudrick's distinction between simple and complex characters as well, where Jane would certainly be construed as simpler than the complex Elizabeth.

11. Whether this awkward situation could ever excuse Darcy for his comments in his proposal remains dubious to me. The painful consciousness Elizabeth has of her mother's vulgarity from *within* the Bennet family is on a very different level from Darcy's tactlessness in emphasizing what Elizabeth is only too aware of. His position is that of a suitor who should be totally unsure of a positive reception, and would be - if he had less of the confidence wealth and status brought. As the Elizabeth Bennet of the BBC version of *Pride and Prejudice* puts it, 'the very rich can afford to give offence wherever they please'.

12. The way she handles Darcy's famous slight of her at the first ball is early proof of this, as has already been shown.

13. See Williams, 1986:63.

14. The position of the narrator in Jane Austen's novels fluctuates in a rather interesting manner in terms of the presentation of wit in female characters. Elizabeth is witty and gets away with it. Emma's overactive imagination leads her astray; her wit is somewhat misdirected as well. In *Mansfield Park* it is the female 'villain' who is endowed with wit and the heroine singularly lacking in this attribute which was considered a dubious asset for women, presumably because it did not enhance the appearance of docility and submissiveness. In *Emma* the narrator and Mr Elton allocate wit to Emma while she (in the case of the charade directed to her) mistakenly assumes him to be attributing it to Harriet as a result of being in love.

15. According to Kirkham, once Elizabeth has been fully enlightened by reading Darcy's letter, she 'takes on the character of the later Austen heroine; she becomes the central intelligence through whose eyes and understanding events and character are mediated to the reader' (1983:91).

16. In this respect Elizabeth is like all Jane Austen's heroines to a greater or lesser degree, none probably as fully so as Emma. Among the critics who explore this aspect of *Emma* is Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961:254).

17. In *Emma* this is so skilfully and almost surreptitiously done that it is possible to be party to her (manipulative) thought process almost without being aware of it.

18. Some of the attitudes displayed by Elizabeth on her first visit to Pemberley could of course be interpreted as finally corroborating Charlotte's point of view: 'And of this place ... I might have been mistress!' (1972:268) and her admiring reflection on Darcy: 'How much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow!' (1972:272)

19. Cf. the earlier analysis of Miss Bingley's characterization of Elizabeth as reader on pp.19-20 above.

20. Despite his lack of fortune, Colonel Fitzwilliam is at least far more eligible than Wickham.

21. That is, the account is biased according to Elizabeth's point of view. This becomes far more apparent on a rereading of the novel.

22. As Elizabeth herself put it, 'I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry' (1972:224).

23. According to Kirkham,

Once she has read it [Darcy's letter] and reflected upon its contents, which she does with speed and a remarkable display of judicious critical acumen, taking due note of the interest of the writer and the quality of his language, as well as of events and conduct which she had previously misunderstood, she becomes the best informed, as well as the most intelligent character in the entire novel.

(1983:91)

It seems to me that she has always been 'the most intelligent character in the entire novel', prejudiced, misinformed, but still shrewd, alert and critical.

24. It is significant that in the rewritten ending of *Persuasion* it is as reader that Anne discovers that she is still the first loved object with Captain Wentworth. His looks at the concert have suggested the possibility. One look of passionate entreaty precedes her reading of his letter but it is the letter itself which makes the point. Her 'eyes devoured the following words':

'... I offer myself to you again with a heart even more your own, than when you almost broke it eight years and a half ago. Dare not say that man forgets sooner than woman, that his love has an earlier death. I have loved none but you....'

(1965:240)

25. Jane, never to be relied on to see entirely clearly herself as a result of her desire to see only the good, is in any case made significantly less of a confidante of the heroine towards the end of the novel as the latter's knowledge of Darcy increases and the former's intimacy with Charles Bingley develops.

26. Harriet Smith in *Emma* would be an example of such a woman, and Wickham perhaps of such a man.

27. In a letter to Fanny Knight dated 18 November 1814 she comments that '[a]nything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without Affection' (R.W. Chapman's *Jane Austen's Letters to her sister Cassandra and others*, 1979:410) and a couple of weeks later (30 November 1814) reinforces her point to Fanny with the comment that 'nothing can be compared to the misery of being bound *without Love*' (1979:418).

28. Her comments also avoid making a clear distinction between author and narrator.

29. As Barbara Hardy puts it, '[h]er moral comments are weighty, but never heavy' (1975:36).

30. Examples range from the behaviour of Captain Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* to that of Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr Woodhouse in *Emma*, the Prices at Portsmouth and the Bertrams of Mansfield Park in *Mansfield Park*, and finally vain Sir Walter Elliot and his eldest daughter in *Persuasion*.

31. In the case of *Emma* it is Mr Woodhouse's chicken coop which prevents an interminable delay to Mr Knightley and Emma being able to marry. General Tilney's begrudging approval is hard won by Catherine and Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*, and even the final sentence of *Persuasion* contains a somewhat ominous reference to 'the tax of quick alarm' which must be paid by those belonging to the navy.

32. In a letter to Cassandra, Jane Austen famously referred to her latest work as follows:

Upon the whole, however, I am quite vain enough and well satisfied enough. The work is rather too light, and bright, and sparkling; it wants shade; it wants to be

stretched out here and there with a long chapter of sense, if it could be had; if not, of solemn specious nonsense, about something unconnected with the story; an essay on writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparté, or anything that would form a contrast, and bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness and epigrammatism of the general style.

(4 February 1813, Chapman, ed., 1979:299-300)

33. Charlotte faces these exigencies to a greater degree than the Bennet girls in terms of age (she is twenty-seven) and possibly to a lesser extent in terms of finances as she had brothers she could depend on.

34. This refers to the time when money is used in persuading Wickham to marry Lydia, Darcy's money as it eventually transpires.

35. In Bush's *Jane Austen* and Hardy's *A Reading of Jane Austen*, both published in 1975.

CHAPTER TWO

NARRATING WAYS AND WILES IN THE NOVELS OF THE BRONTES: THE EXAMPLE OF *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

... *Wildfell Hall* was also a direct protest against the social conventions and law of the day, and might be described as the first sustained feminist novel.

(G.D. Hargreaves, 1985:1)¹

Unlike Charlotte, whose novels also critiqued the myth of domestic bliss but who eroticized the very dominance/submission dynamic from which she longed to escape, Emily and Anne seem to have moved beyond any faith in categories of gender as formulated by their culture. To them, gender is a ragged and somewhat ridiculous masquerade concealing the essential sameness of men and women.

(N.M. Jacobs, 1986:204-5)

In this chapter I explore the issue of why the Brontë sisters felt horrifying versions of women's passions had to be enclosed within conventional male frames. Even *The Professor*, Charlotte Brontë's first novel, tells what is essentially a woman's story from a male point of view. In *Wuthering Heights* and even more so in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, it is the juxtaposition of male and female narrators which exposes some of the contradictions in the respective positions of men and women in society.

This chapter takes as its starting point the view that the novels of the Brontë sisters form a dialectical relationship.² *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is viewed in part as a critical comment on *Wuthering Heights*. *The Professor* was written by Charlotte from a first-person male narrator's point of view and turned down by seven publishers during 1846 and 1847 and finally only published posthumously in 1857. It has been regarded as the least successful of the Brontës' novels.

Charlotte then went on to achieve great success with her second novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847), written from the vantage point of the central female narrator. *Agnes Grey* (1847), Anne's first novel and a relative success, is also written in the first person, *Agnes Grey* featuring both as narrator and central character, like *Jane Eyre*.³ *Agnes Grey* was followed by *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), with its complicated embedded narratives in the form of Helen's diary as well as her letters to her brother, all framed within Gilbert Markham's epistle to his brother-in-law. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* can be seen as an imitation as well as a criticism of *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and in part a corrective comment on *Jane Eyre*. *Shirley* (1849) presents Charlotte's attempt at omniscient narration, and *Villette* (1853), written in the form of spiritual autobiography, is her most subtle and complex achievement.⁴

It is clear that, while the Brontë sisters shared a background, interests and ideas on techniques, their aims as novelists were essentially different. While certain issues are of central concern in all the Brontë sisters' novels, their narrative strategies in exploring these reveal significant differences, which point us to their different emphases in treating related issues.

The focus in this chapter is on *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* not so much as a Brontë novel but as an Anne Brontë novel. This is to elaborate upon the point made particularly

by recent critics⁵ that Anne has a very distinctive voice of her own. The shift made by Anne from employing a single female first-person narrator in *Agnes Grey* to enclosing Helen Huntingdon's diary within a male narrator's text suggests her recognition of the centrality of the male gaze even within female subject construction. *Wuthering Heights* places within patently inadequate conventional frames - that is, the very limited and unimaginative perspectives of Lockwood and Nelly Dean - the wild and fiery love story of Heathcliff and Cathy. Their relationship is conducted across boundaries of incest taboo and class conflict, untenable within the narrow confines of their society, and to be fully consummated only in death. Emily Brontë's use of Lockwood's voyeurism and Nelly's eavesdropping to present a story of high drama and intense passion has been critically discussed very widely and in great depth.⁶ In this chapter it serves primarily as a reference point for Anne's subsequent use of framing devices in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

While earlier critics often completely ignored Anne, or at least neglected her, following Charlotte in placing her in her sisters' shadow,⁷ Langland makes the point that with *Agnes Grey*, Anne in fact paved the way both for Charlotte in the writing of *Jane Eyre*, and for later women writers,⁸ to write first-person works from a female point of view:

In both novels [*Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*], a privileging of the woman as narrator allows Anne to create a female reality formerly uncharted in novels.

Male writers such as Samuel Richardson (*Pamela* and *Clarissa*) and Daniel Defoe (*Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*) had employed female narrators, and women writers like Jane Austen and Fanny Burney had used third-person narrators who took a female point of view, but women writers had not yet claimed for themselves the authority of speaking directly through a woman as narrator. It allowed new freedoms for developing the woman's perspective in the world.

(1989:31)

Langland concedes that Anne's ability to write so competently about controversial issues such as laws, education and employment for women, and thereby to make a meaningful contribution to the woman issue debate, 'no doubt reflects the enabling sisterly context out of which her novels were born': 'That bond of common endeavour and affection, however, fuelled three *individual* talents and sharpened three *individual* perspectives' (1989:28). Anne's point that 'Acton Bell is neither Currer nor Ellis Bell' - made forcibly in her Preface to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*⁹ - seems to need continual restating. It is not unusual for critics in discussing the Brontës to omit mentioning Anne entirely or - if they mention *Agnes Grey* as part of the Brontë sisters' first attempt at publication - to omit any reference to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. G.E. Harrison's *Clue to the Brontës* (published in 1948), for example, a 210-page work, contains not even a single reference to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, even though Harrison's central subject is the (specifically Methodist-flavoured) Evangelical religious fervour with which Patrick Brontë's presence is believed to have imbued the Haworth parsonage. Of all the Brontë novels one would think

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall particularly deserved mention as the one dealing most explicitly with religious issues.¹⁰

Charlotte's response to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* - and indeed to her sister both as person and as author - is evident in the following extract from her letter to W.S. Williams:

You will have seen some of the notices of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. I wish my sister felt the unfavourable ones less keenly. She does not say much, for she is of a remarkably taciturn, still, thoughtful nature, reserved even with her nearest of kin, but I cannot avoid seeing that her spirits are depressed sometimes. The fact is, neither she nor any of us expected that view to be taken of the book which has been taken by some critics. That it had faults of execution, faults of art, was obvious, but faults of intention or feeling could be suspected by none who knew the writer. For my own part, I consider the subject unfortunately chosen - it was one the author was not qualified to handle at once vigorously and truthfully. The simple and natural - quiet description and simple pathos are, I think, Acton Bell's forte. I liked Agnes Grey better than the present work.

(31 July 1848; Wise & Symington, eds, vol. 2, 1933:241)

Charlotte's tone here, especially towards the end, is obviously rather patronizing. The use of terms such as 'simple', 'natural', 'quiet', 'pathos' suggests that Charlotte did not feel her sister should be ambitious, and venture into the more dramatic territory viewed as the terrain of her older sisters. She was 'not qualified' to handle her subject 'at once vigorously and truthfully', Charlotte claimed.¹¹ My view is that Anne does both these things remarkably well.

Margaret Mary Berg treats

Charlotte Brontë's dismissal of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as an assertion in a tacit critical exchange between the two sisters concerning the proper function of art - and it is clearly one in which Charlotte, writing a year after Anne's death, had the last word. This exchange is, at best, difficult to reconstruct because of Charlotte's

position as interpreter to the public of her sister's life and work. Working from signs of *Jane Eyre's* influence on *Wildfell Hall*, however, it is possible to begin to recover a sense of Anne Brontë's own voice and to discuss a more elaborate purpose at work in *Wildfell Hall* than Charlotte's comments allow for - one which implies a criticism of Charlotte Brontë herself as an artist....

Anne Brontë appears at once to adopt and to modify the material of her sister's novel, shifting the focus from her characters' consciousness to a larger moral framework, or even from this life to life after death.... To as concerned and didactic a writer as Anne Brontë, *Jane Eyre* might have appeared to evade, if not actually distort, moral and religious issues through its emphasis on the individual and the imaginative; in *Wildfell Hall* Anne Brontë attempts to correct this faulty [as perceived by her] emphasis by taking a more responsible approach to the representation of the same issues.

(My italics; 1987:10-14)

Anne's explicitly moral and religious concerns are emphasized in this extract. It certainly seems safe to assume that Anne as the youngest in the family strongly felt the impact of her sisters' world-views. Their fictional representations in *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* are challenged in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, while structural aspects are borrowed. Where the passion given free rein in *Wuthering Heights* and partially exalted in *Jane Eyre* is curbed in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, there is a repetition of the pattern of narrative framing devices (as in *Wuthering Heights*) and of a central female character telling her own tale (as in both *Agnes Grey* and *Jane Eyre*).

The Preface to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is a clear exposition by Anne herself of her didactic motives. Anne's particular blend of Christianity and

feminism struggles for expression in the presentation of the complex character of Helen Huntingdon.

* * *

Anne Brontë had a very firm Christian outlook (though in espousing universalism she differed doctrinally from the established church) and her sense of morality was unswerving. She felt the need to educate her reading public in what is often a didactic, even sermonizing, style. Emily in *Wuthering Heights* has depicted an amoral universe full of intense spiritual, sexual and emotional passion¹² and Charlotte's position is invariably riddled with ambivalences and ambiguities.¹³ Anne, on the other hand, is very lucid about what she wants her novels to convey, even to the point of explicitly spelling out the effect she wishes them to have on her readers.

In her Preface, Anne formulates the desired effect of her writing as follows:

... if I have warned one rash youth from following in their [the unhappy scapegrace with his few profligate companions'] steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain.

(1985:30)

Her gentleness and humility along with her firmness of purpose are suggested when she 'humbly crave[s] ... pardon' from 'any honest reader' who may 'have derived more pain than pleasure' from reading her novel. She expresses her intention to 'endeavour to do better another time, for I love to give innocent pleasure':

Yet, be it understood, I shall not limit my ambition to this - or even to producing 'a perfect work of art': time and talents so spent I should consider wasted and misapplied. Such humble talents as God has given me I will endeavour to put to their greatest use; if I am able to amuse I will try to benefit too; and when I feel it my duty to speak an unpalatable truth, with the help of God, I will speak it, though it be to the prejudice of my name and to the detriment of my reader's immediate pleasure as well as my own.

While her desire is '*instruire et plaire*' it is on the first of these that her emphasis clearly lies.

Chitham argues that during the final stages of *Wuthering Heights* there were 'ominous rumblings of dissension at Haworth'. Anne had experienced more of life than she wished to with the 'unpleasant and undreamt of' aspects of human nature to which her brother and Mrs Robinson, involved in an extra-marital love-affair, had exposed her at Thorp Green:

She has acquired enough knowledge of the world to feel able to comment on Emily's work.... Anne now believes she understands the purpose of art: to serve the turn of the moralist...

(1993:215-6)

Katherine Frank is equally decisive: 'Perhaps even more consciously than Charlotte, Anne conceived *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as an "answer" to *Wuthering Heights*'. There are obvious and superficial parallels: the houses are similarly named (*Wuthering Heights* and *Wildfell Hall*), as are the characters. Anne's choice of names Hargrave, Huntingdon and Hattersley (and the initial H- extended even to the heroine Helen) are presumably not coincidental echoes of Hindley, Hareton and Heathcliff. More significant for my purposes is the use of two internal narrators, one male and one female:

The opening male-narrated chapters create a mystery; the central female-narrated ones reach into the past and gradually unravel and resolve the mysteries; and the concluding chapters return to the present and the framing male narratives.

(1990:229)

It is this aspect of framing - particularly the containment, or embedding, of a woman's story within a man's narrative - that requires attention. As with *Wuthering Heights*, in *The Tenant* we have two narrators, one male (controlling the outer frame) and one female ('mastering' the inner frame, or embedded narrative). The most obvious difference is that in *Wuthering Heights* the narrators are participant-observers; in *The Tenant* they are the two central characters.¹⁴

Both the Preface and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* provide clues as to why it seemed necessary to the Brontës to cloak tales of female passion within frames of conventional males who function as narrators, as do Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights*, Markham in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and less dramatically, William Crimsworth, 'the professor' in *The Professor*. It may arguably be that the Brontë sisters, most notably Charlotte and Anne, had strong ideas about the discrepancies between male and female education. (Of course one does not have to look further than Branwell to find the reason.)¹⁵ Charlotte wrote to Miss Wooler:

I think ... that the mode of bringing them [men] up is strange, they are not half sufficiently guarded from temptation - Girls are protected as if they were something very frail and silly indeed while boys are turned loose on the world as if they - of all beings in

existence, were the wisest and the least liable to be led astray.

(30 January 1846; Wise & Symington, eds, vol. 2, 1933:77)

The same kind of vehemence is detected in Anne's Preface and in the speeches of Helen Huntingdon.

Anne is the only Brontë who could be viewed as a successor of Jane Austen's, at least in certain regards, particularly thematic ones.¹⁶ Langland considers the 'Austenian balance of reason and passion' (1989:38-39) to be endorsed in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.¹⁷ And indeed the contents of Helen's advice to Esther Hargrave does have a Jane Austen flavour:¹⁸

'When I tell you not to marry *without* love, I do not advise you to marry for love alone - there are many, many other things to be considered. Keep both heart and hand in your own possession, till you see good reason to part with them.'

(1985:380)

Helen then proceeds to discuss the relative merits and demerits of the single (versus married) life: 'though in single life your joys may not be very many, your sorrows, at least, will not be more than you can bear':

As alien as this 'rational' approach to affairs of the heart was to Charlotte, it was just as clearly reasonable, if not always attainable, to Anne. Like Austen, Anne felt that the feelings should not approve a match at which the mind revolted.

(Langland, 1989:38-39)

Anne shows her heroine stumbling as a result of not adhering sufficiently closely to her judgment, but allowing herself to be swayed by Arthur Huntingdon's charm and her own feelings. Helen is presented as guilty of not having heeded more closely

the assurance she gave her aunt: 'It is needless to say I ought to be able to respect and honour the man I marry as well as love him, for I cannot love him without' (1985:150-1). Had she been more faithful to this principle, she would perhaps not have married Huntingdon hoping to improve his moral character. Anne's didactic style, however, at times heavy-handed and obvious, contrasts with the ironic, at times reticent and always controlled narrative tone in Austen's novels.

The outer frames provided by both Lockwood and Markham, male narrators, function as an almost protective covering for the horrors concealed within, the women's stories:

In both *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, we approach a horrific private reality only after passing through and then discarding the perceptual structures of a narrator - significantly, a male narrator - who represents the public world that makes possible and tacitly approves the excesses behind the closed doors of these pre-Victorian homes.

(N.M. Jacobs, 1986:204)

One may - and I think should - question the kind of accusation almost any male narrator would be loaded with, according to the implications of the phrasing above ('significantly, a male narrator'), namely, not only being the representative of the public world but also 'tacitly approv[ing] the excesses behind the closed doors of these pre-Victorian homes' (my emphasis). Nevertheless, I do agree with Jacobs's presentation of the functional aspect of narrative layering. The more conventional male frames conceal and then ultimately reveal - exposing in their full horror - the stories of the central female

characters. In the case of Catherine Earnshaw, she plays an active part in her own tragedy; in the case of Helen Huntingdon, she escapes from bondage by a great effort of will.

Unlike the passionless gaze shared by Nelly Dean and Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights*,¹⁹ there is a marked distinction between the positions of the two narrators in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Markham's relative immaturity and self-centredness contrast with Helen's greater depth of character which is exemplified partially by her firm commitment to her Christian faith. The contrast between them also serves to expose the lax nature of moral education for men at the time.²⁰ The attention given to the formal education of men is contrasted with the lack of attention given to their moral education. Anne Brontë expresses her disapproval of this in her Preface to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and also in the emphases in the novel itself. The degradation of Arthur Huntingdon is made much of, to the extent that it disgusted contemporary readers and placed Charlotte in a defensive position. Helen also makes eloquent speeches on the need for both women's and men's education to be conceived of differently, and the arising dangers if such changes were to be neglected.

Helen Huntingdon expresses herself to Mrs Markham on the subject (in response to the suggestion that Helen should allow her son to enjoy the taste of wine) and identical views are

reiterated in the Preface. One thus deduces that these were in fact Anne's views and that she very strongly felt the need to make them public. To Mrs Markham's objection that Helen will treat her son 'like a girl - you'll spoil his spirit, and make a mere Miss Nancy of him' (1985:55), Helen responds by making the point to both Mrs Markham and her son Gilbert that society differentiates too radically between the sexes in terms of moral education - to the disadvantage of both. To Gilbert Markham she says vehemently:

'... You would have us encourage our sons to prove all things by their own experience, while our daughters must not even profit by the experience of others. Now I would have both so to benefit by the experience of others, and the precepts of a higher authority, that they should know beforehand to refuse the evil and choose the good, and require no experimental proofs to teach them the evil of transgression. I would not send a poor girl into the world unarmed against her foes, and ignorant of the snares that beset her path, nor would I watch and guard her, till, deprived of self-respect and self-reliance, she lost the power, or the will, to watch and guard herself; - and as for my son - if I thought he would grow up to be what you call a man of the world - one that has "*seen life*," and glories in his experience, even though he should so far profit by it, as to sober down, at length, into a useful and respected member of society - I would rather that he died to-morrow! - rather a thousand times!'

(1985:57)

Painfully schooled by her experience with Arthur Huntingdon and cured of any naive belief that her influence could morally improve him, Helen here expresses herself in exactly the kind of language Anne Brontë uses in her Preface. To judge both by its contents and by the Preface, the writing of the novel itself is clearly an attempt by the author to enable 'our sons' and 'our daughters' 'to benefit by the experience of

others' in order that they may 'know beforehand to refuse the evil and choose the good', in the words of Helen Huntingdon, and not have to experiment with evil themselves. Anne has obvious didactic reasons for revealing points about the education of women and men as well as for the particular narrative strategies she has chosen. She wishes and intends both men and women (readers) to learn from the example of others. Arthur Huntingdon is held up as a negative example; Helen's experience is intended to be a warning; Markham's improvement as he reads Helen's diary suggests a path for readers to follow.²¹

* * * * *

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall consists of two letters, both by Markham to his brother-in-law. The first short letter encompasses an introduction to Chapter I and includes Chapter I, and the second constitutes the rest of this long epistolary novel in which the narrator is Gilbert Markham. It contains within its pages the journal of Helen Huntingdon, *reading whose story* alters the male narrator/reader to the extent that he is finally deemed a suitable husband by the heroine.²² The outer frame of the novel is thus in a sense subverted by the embedded narrative. This is the crux of my argument and its ramifications are explored in relation to the depiction of the two central characters and narrators.

Markham introduces himself both as reader and as editor of Helen Huntingdon's diary and addresses himself on the

subject of the diary as follows in his letter to Halford:²³

I have it now before me; and though you could not, of course, peruse it with half the interest that I did, I know you would not be satisfied with an abbreviation of its contents, and you shall have the whole, save, perhaps, a few passages here and there of merely temporal interest to the writer, or such as would serve to encumber the story rather than elucidate it. It begins somewhat abruptly, thus - but we will reserve its commencement for another chapter, and call it, -

Chapter 16

The Warnings of Experience

Apparent here is simultaneously a patronizing of Halford as reader and a possessive attitude towards the manuscript - in the selective omissions and in the giving sections of it titles. However, almost despite himself, for the next twenty-nine chapters, Markham as narrator takes a backseat and merges with Halford, as with us, as readers, of Helen Huntingdon's diary. It becomes Helen's story. After Markham has finished reading Helen's manuscript, he does not revert to being sole narrator. Instead, their two perspectives remain interwoven from the point of view that we become co-readers with Markham of Helen's letters to her brother Frederick Lawrence. As with her journal, so with her letters: they are detailed and present lengthy dialogues between herself and her husband. In other words, the woman's voice remains central from the time her story is first introduced by means of the diary. Her perspective is still strongly registered, even when the male narrator's voice is again foregrounded. It thus transpires that Markham's long epistle to his brother-in-law serves as vehicle for the telling of a woman's story. Furthermore,

through the reading of the diary, the reader of the novel and the original male narrator, that is, Markham, now have the opportunity to be educated in the way Anne Brontë proposes in her Preface and Helen Huntingdon recommends in the text, that is, warned by the experience of others.

An unsympathetic male reader, for example, who starts off in a frame of mind similar to that of the early Gilbert Markham or with the purely pleasure-oriented outlook represented by Arthur Huntingdon, may remain unchanged and even untouched by reading Helen's story of suffering and abuse. However, Anne's hope is that if he is indeed prepared to pay the price of absorbing deeper and possibly more painful truths than hitherto known or accepted, the reward would be a spirit more sensitive to the needs and wants of women.²⁴ Women readers would be expected to learn from the mistake made by Helen, particularly in marrying a rake in the hope of reforming him. More positively, her example of bold, spirited independence could serve as a model to be emulated.

George Moore, Winifred Gérin and Terry Eagleton all treat the enclosure of Helen's story within the diary which she lends to Markham as a strategic mistake by Anne Brontë. Moore, in singularly dramatic style, conjures up an (inevitably male!) would-be protector for Anne, as though her critical novelist-sisters were not capable of making the necessary comment:

An accident would have saved her, almost any man of letters would have laid his hand upon her arm and said:

You must not let your heroine give her diary to the young farmer ... Your heroine must tell the young farmer her story ... The presence of your heroine, her voice, her gestures, the questions that would arise and the answers that would be given ... would preserve the atmosphere of a passionate and original love story. The diary broke the story in halves ...

(1930:218)

Gérin in 1979 cites Moore with approval and agrees:

How right was Moore! By the device of the diary the drama that wrecked Helen's life is seen at one remove, not in the heat of action, in the palpitating moments of hurt and disillusion, at the height of anger and recrimination.

(1985:14)

Moore's solution would still not have provided the immediacy implied by Gérin to be superior. Above all, neither Helen's direct 'tell[ing] the young farmer her story' as Moore proposed nor 'the heat of action' desired by Gérin would provide the reader with what was clearly far more important to Anne: the heroine's own thoughts and feelings on her experiences as articulated to herself, provided ideally in the form of a private diary.

Eagleton's main objection to the use of Helen's diary is structural: 'What is officially an interlude becomes the guts of the book, displacing the framework which surrounds it'

(1975:136). Surely the phrase 'officially an interlude'

suggests a mistaken understanding of Anne's aim with Helen's story - it is exactly intended to be the 'guts' of the book, and the fact that it does indeed 'displac[e] the framework which surrounds it' is a tribute to the effectiveness of Brontë's technique.²⁵ Contemporary critics, myself included,

recognize in this device a fundamental aspect of 'the woman's story' that Anne is trying to tell. Where some of the Brontës' novels are written from the first-person vantage-point of a female narrator, my contention is that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is a woman's story in disguise, as it were. Where *Wuthering Heights* tells Cathy and Heathcliff's story indirectly, Helen's diary directly and with clear moral implications outlines the consequences of putting passion before good sense. The feminist dimension of the novel encompasses Helen's determination to break free from the trap her marriage has become. Despite her mistake in marrying Huntingdon, she thus becomes a role model of courage and independence.

The transition from Gilbert Markham to Helen Huntingdon as narrator is made very abruptly but preceded by an interlude of violence which prepares the reader for some radical change of direction. The reader moves from an unflattering self-portrait of Gilbert Markham (in which he never utters so much as a breath of self-condemnation for his assault on Frederick Lawrence), to the introduction of the rakish Mr Huntingdon just a few pages later in the words of an admiring and susceptible eighteen-year-old. Helen at the opening of her journal (in 1821) is in fact not much more mature than Markham at the start of his narrative (in 1827). Edith Kostka writes:

... Brontë effects a subtle turn as she shifts her narrative from the focus of an immature youth who has yet to gain knowledge of the ways of the world, to that of a woman who has already learned the painful lessons such

worldly knowledge entails.

(1992:41)

But in fact this learning is a gradual process. When Helen's diary starts, she is a starry-eyed young woman of eighteen. By the time it ends, she is a disillusioned wife and a determined and courageous mother of a five-year-old son. As readers, alongside Gilbert Markham, the narrator-reader, we now watch Helen grow into maturity as she pays for the consequences of a mistaken choice of marriage partner.

Gilbert Markham, the ostensible narrator of the novel, prefaces his formal beginning, Chapter One, with an opening address to his friend, 'J. Halford, Esq.': 'Well! I did not take up my pen to reproach you, nor to defend myself, nor to apologize for past offences, but if possible, to atone for them' (1985:33). He then offers 'not a sketch' but rather 'a full and faithful account of certain circumstances connected with the most important event of my life ... a tale of many chapters.' Like *The Scarlet Letter*, what follows presents to the reader yet another very persuasive invitation to 'trust the tale not the teller'. Helen's story emerges most directly in Markham's presentation of her journal but, as has already been noted, even after that section of the journal to which he has access ends, embedded narratives still emanating from *Helen's* pen emerge in the form of letters to her brother Frederick Lawrence towards the end of the novel. Again, the reader is thus exposed to self-representation on the part of Helen as internal narrator. She emerges as a far more forceful

character and narrator than Markham, ostensibly the narrator in the text.

There is a tantalizing gap between Markham's curiosity as to Helen's initial thoughts about him and what the reader guesses of her attitude, based on what he informs the reader of her expressions and behaviour. Even in the early part of the novel when Markham is the only narrator, his descriptions include aspects of Helen's somewhat contemptuous female gaze which have the effect of subverting his own complacent view of himself - partly in his own eyes, and certainly in the reader's. The self-characterization of the narrator is done in terms which simultaneously reinforce and expose his chauvinism. There is a marked contrast between his doting mother's admiration and hints that Helen is correspondingly unimpressed.

Markham, who regards himself as most eligible, clearly regards any woman he may fancy as a potential wife. It is at church that he eyes Helen as his future possession should he so desire.²⁶ The passage in question, narrated by Markham, reads as follows:

And there [in the old family pew, appertaining to Wildfell Hall] I beheld a tall, lady-like figure, clad in black. Her face was towards me, and there was something in it, which, once seen, invited me to look again.... her complexion was clear and pale; her eyes I could not see, for being bent upon her prayer-book they were concealed by their drooping lids and long black lashes, but the brows above were expressive and well defined, the forehead was lofty and intellectual, the nose, a perfect aquiline, and the features in general, unexceptionable - only there was a slight hollowness about the cheeks and eyes, and the lips, though finely formed, were a little

too thin, a little too firmly compressed, and had something about them that betokened, I thought, no very soft or amiable temper; and I said in my heart -

'I would rather admire you from this distance, fair lady, than be the partner of your home.'

Just then, she happened to raise her eyes, and they met mine; I did not choose to withdraw my gaze, and she turned again to her book, but with a momentary, indefinable expression of quiet scorn, that was inexpressibly provoking to me.

'She thinks me an impudent puppy,' thought I. 'Humph! - she shall change her mind before long, if I think it worthwhile.'

(1985:40-41)

The idea that virtually any woman he should desire is there for the taking is evident in his attitude to Helen and in his response to her return of his bold male gaze. In the instance cited above the expression in Helen's eyes implicitly challenges Markham's assumptions.

In the first letter to Halford, soon after recounting the above incident, Markham indulges in self-flattering reminiscences of the accessibility of Eliza Millward and his mother's opinion of him, as though to console himself for Helen's scorn:

Now, Halford, before I close this letter, I'll tell you who Eliza Millward was; she was the vicar's younger daughter, and a very engaging little creature, for whom I felt no small degree of partiality; - and she knew it, though I had never come to any direct explanation, and had no definite intention of so doing, for my mother, who maintained there was no one good enough for me, within twenty miles round, could not bear the thought of my marrying that insignificant little thing, whom in addition to her numerous other disqualifications, had not twenty pounds to call her own....

(1985:41-42)

Markham then proceeds to provide a description of the person of Eliza in terms which suggest mutual enjoyment of their

flirtation: 'her manners more frequently resembled those of a pretty, playful kitten, that is now pert and roguish, now timid and demure, according to its own sweet will' (1985:42). The description of Mrs Markham's attitude to her son explains the earlier account in which Helen was viewed as prospective 'partner' on first glance. He has not been brought up to think of women as likely to refuse him, but as himself being in the advantageous position to choose. This reinforces the reader's sense that he has been brought up to believe it is a 'man's world' and that he acts accordingly, especially in his treatment of women. His attitude is that they are placed on earth to meet his expectations and satisfy his whims rather than as beings whose wills may not be set to please him. Reading Helen's diary will alter his perspective. Encountering a woman he loves and who yet seems out of reach will make him value her more.

* * *

In both the cases of Helen Huntingdon in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and Ruth in Gaskell's novel *Ruth*, the heroines pose as widows. Helen Huntingdon is a runaway wife; Ruth an unmarried pregnant girl. Both Helen Huntingdon (as Mrs Graham) and Ruth Hilton (as Mrs Denbigh) use the subterfuge of widowhood to enable them to move freely in a society which would otherwise condemn them. Both thereby open themselves to being regarded as impostors - Helen Huntingdon is in the embarrassing position of being regarded by Markham as a

potential wife.

Despite the inauspicious interchange of gazes at church, a form of friendship develops between the heroine Helen ('Graham') and the male narrator. In order to prevent Markham's falling in love with her, Helen lends him her most intimate story - the only manuscript copy of her diary.

Helen Huntingdon's two forms of self-expression are journal writing and painting. Both have the paradoxical dual function of self-expression and concealment at their centre. Painting in addition is a means of survival for Helen as she aims to support herself and her son.

Helen's journal is a secret revelation of her innermost thoughts and feelings - not intended for a third person's eyes, certainly not for her husband's, nor for her would-be suitor's. It is significant that even when she feels compelled to let Markham read her diary, she tears out the pages concerning her impressions of him. And it is disastrous to her plans, fortunately only temporarily, when Arthur gets hold of her manuscript and reads about her planned escape, which he is thereby able to prevent. She is writing primarily for herself - for clarification, for purposes of reflection, even for companionship in solitude. In her case writing operates as a form of empowerment. The very act of articulation is a means of negotiating one's relations with the world - which may to a greater or lesser extent be striving to control or dictate the legitimacy of one's responses. On the one hand, journal

writing is a form of autobiography, retelling one's story in order to come to terms with the past by means of recreating it in the present. It is also a form of recovering what may have been lost in the process of interaction and experience which that past involved. It is a written form of talking to oneself²⁷ and, if necessary, of renegotiating one's relations with self, other and world. For Helen Huntingdon it becomes a means of dealing with isolation, of dealing with her intellectual loneliness as the wife of a non-thinker. It becomes too an opportunity for creating a new identity. Clearly, her assumed identity as Helen Graham, painter, 'tenant of Wildfell Hall', could not have been taken without the opportunity to articulate her dissatisfaction with her marital situation, her need to protect her son from his father's influence, and her own need for space and privacy.

In the following passage Helen Huntingdon's diary is shown to serve the triple function of compensating for an absent lover, providing the opportunity for self-definition, and finally, offering space for necessary and confidential inner debate. In a chapter entitled (by Markham - as editor) *First Weeks of Matrimony*, Helen writes:

He will be away all day; and so I will amuse myself with my neglected diary - if I can give that name to such an irregular composition. It is exactly four months since I opened it last.

I am married now, and settled down as Mrs Huntingdon of Grassdale Manor. I have had eight weeks experience of matrimony. And do I regret the step I have taken? - No - though I must confess, in my secret heart, that Arthur is not what I thought him at first, and if I had known him in the beginning as thoroughly as I do now, I probably

never should have loved him, and if I had loved him first, and then made the discovery, I fear I should have thought it my duty not to have married him. To be sure, I might have known him, for everyone was willing enough to tell me about him and he himself was no accomplished hypocrite, but I was wilfully blind, and now, instead of regretting that I did not discern his full character before I was indissolubly bound to him I am glad; for it has saved me a great deal of battling with my conscience, and a great deal of consequent trouble and pain; and, whatever I ought to have done, my duty, now, is plainly to love him and to cleave to him; and this just tallies with my inclination.

(1985:215)

There is growing lucidity in her understanding of her husband's nature and of his demeaning treatment of her, his expectations of her:

I should like to be less of a pet and more of a friend ... Arthur is selfish ... he likes to be pleased, and it is my delight to please him ...

(1985:216)

Here Helen is in some ways echoing Mrs Markham's questionable ideas on a woman's role within marriage, evident from the following remark Mrs Markham makes to her son Gilbert: 'it's your business to please yourself, and hers [your future wife's] to please you ...' (1985:79).

The extent to which this current philosophy of what constitutes marital happiness had been imbibed by Arthur Huntingdon becomes evident from Helen's journalled descriptions of their honeymoon. The realization of her husband's defects dawns on her gradually. Regarding the bridal tour, she writes:

when I had expressed a particular interest in anything that I saw or desired to see, it had been displeasing to him in as much as it proved that I could take delight in anything disconnected with himself.

As for Paris, we only just touched at that, and he would not give me time to see one tenth of the beauties and interesting objects of Rome. He wanted to get me home, he said, to have me all to himself, and to see me safely installed as the mistress of Grassdale Manor, just as single-minded, as naive, and piquante as I was; and, as if I had been some frail butterfly, he expressed himself fearful of rubbing the silver off my wings by bringing me into contact with society, especially that of Paris and Rome; and, moreover, he did not scruple to tell me that there were ladies in both places that would tear his eyes out if they happened to meet him with me.

(1985:216)

However much he appears to dote on her, his affection is restricting and self-centred. In this novel, Brontë has depicted a heroine to whom marriage is not an end in itself; spiritual and intellectual growth are important to her, and so will be the moral development of her child.

When there is a clash between her commitment to God and her devotion to her husband, she does not hesitate. When Arthur sets himself up in competition with God, she is uncompromising. She presents this in her diary in dialogue form. To Arthur's complaint that throughout her devotions 'you had not even a glance to spare for me - I declare, it is enough to make one jealous of one's Maker', Helen replies with spirit:

'I will give my whole heart and soul to my Maker if I can,' I answered, 'and not one atom more of it to you than He allows. What are you, sir, that you should set yourself up as a god, and presume to dispute possession of my heart with Him to whom I owe all I have and all I am, every blessing I ever did or ever can enjoy - and yourself among the rest - if you are a blessing, which I am half inclined to doubt.'

(1985:217)

This is an example of the assertiveness which earns Helen the

reputation of being a feminist heroine. Furthermore, in recounting the dialogue in her journal,²⁸ she sees the case more clearly herself, confirming her realization that 'Arthur is selfish' (1985:215). Her journal thus provides the means whereby she registers her disillusionment. Such a phrase furthermore suggests to the reader that her confidence in her own ability to improve him is waning. She is formulating truths to herself, realizations that emerge as *she writes*, that stem from reflection and form part of her meditations on her spiritual journey.

One thing that is foregrounded in her journal is the love-hate relationship she has with writing itself. At times she expresses her impatience with 'these cold go-betweens, pen, ink, and paper' (1985:214) on which she has to rely for communicating with her husband-to-be. At times of disillusionment and anguish she derives relief from communicating her thoughts to her journal. The confessional, self-reflexive nature of the journal is evident in the following extract: 'I cannot get him [her fiancé Arthur] to write or speak in real, solid earnest. ... if it be always so, what shall I do with the serious part of myself?' (1985:214). Much later, after disillusionment with her husband has set in, she continues in a similar vein:

how much of my higher and better self is indeed unmarried - doomed either to harden and sour in the sunless shade of solitude, or to quite degenerate and fall away for lack of nutriment in this unwholesome soil! - But, I repeat, I have no right to complain: only let me state the truth - some of the truth at least, - and see,

hereafter, if any darker truths will blot these pages.
(1985:256)

The journal she writes enables her to maintain a consistent relationship with herself, 'the serious part' of herself, long after she realizes that her husband lacks interest in who she truly is. One of the findings a study of women's writing reveals is that a positive feature for women is the opportunity for self-definition that writing provides. Helen's keeping of a journal in this sense could therefore be construed as a feminist activity.

Writing (by others) is also used as a means to assess character. Once they are married, Helen deduces her husband's levity not only from his speech but also from his writing. His style and her thoughts on it are indicative of a lack of harmonizing between them, of an incapacity for growth in the relationship:

22nd. I have had several letters from Arthur, already. They are not long, but passing sweet, and just like himself - full of ardent affection, and playful, lively humour; but - there is always a *but* in this imperfect world - and I do wish he would *sometimes* be serious. I cannot get him to write or speak in real, solid earnest. I don't much mind it now; but if it be always so, what shall I do with the serious part of myself?

(1985:214)

With 'the serious part of [her]self', Helen eventually decides to leave, with her son, and earn herself a living by means of her art. This shows a remarkable spirit of independence for the age:

She is no patient Griselda, but a strong-minded young woman who clearly weighs up the issues facing her: the destructive effect of the marriage on herself and its

powerlessness to benefit Huntingdon. When, to torture her, he begins to force the boy to drink and imposes his mistress in the household as governess to the child, Helen, like any modern woman, walks out on him, taking her son with her.

(Gérin, 1985:15)

It is not uncommon for women's fiction to subvert the dominant ideology and, at the time Brontë wrote, the dominant ideology was that it was not respectable for a (middle-class) woman to earn her own living. In the Brontës' works (particularly Charlotte's and Anne's), this idea is subverted and women are shown to be capable - though often under great difficulty²⁹ - of indeed producing and earning their own livelihood.³⁰

A representative comment of the time serves to highlight the unusualness of Helen Huntingdon: 'We don't ask what a woman does, we ask whom she belongs to' (Mr Wakem in *The Mill on the Floss*, 1985:542-43). This is the type of society in which Helen strives to support herself and her son. The society is further portrayed in the following reflections and exchange between Helen's young friend Esther Hargrave and herself, as described in Helen's journal:

I have seen Esther Hargrave twice. She is a charming creature, but her blithe spirit is almost broken, and her sweet temper almost spoiled, by the still unremitting persecutions of her mother, in behalf of her rejected suitor - not violent, but wearisome and unremitting like a continual dropping.³¹ The unnatural parent seems determined to make her daughter's life a burden if she will not yield to her desires.

'Mamma does all she can,' said she, 'to make me feel myself a burden and incumbrance to the family, and the most ungrateful, selfish, and undutiful daughter that ever was born; and Walter [her elder brother, would-be lover of Helen], too, is as stern and cold, and haughty as if he hated me outright.... I threaten mamma sometimes, that I'll run away, and disgrace the family by

earning my own livelihood, if she torments me any more; and then that frightens her a little. But I will do it, in good earnest, if they don't mind.'

(1985:439-40)

The fact that in order to be deemed respectable by society middle-class women were not supposed to 'earn their own subsistence' (Mary Wollstonecraft, 1975:85)³² was a restriction Shirley and Caroline are also seen to chafe under in *Shirley*. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Helen's closing remark expresses to her brother the wish that 'somebody that was worthy to possess her would come and take her away'. Fortunately for Esther Hargrave, Frederick Lawrence, narratee and reader of Helen's letter, finally does. This 'happy ending' for Esther is yet another case of successful narrative embedding as Helen tells Esther's story in her diary and in her letters to her brother. In the concluding chapters of the novel, Markham describes how he stumbled upon Frederick Lawrence and Esther's wedding, thus inadvertently supplying the happy ending the reader of Helen's diary and letters has been led to hope for.

In the character of Helen Huntingdon is found a heroine who has an artistic means of expression independent of her marital relationship, which gives her some 'share of the more independent life'.³³ Both Helen's painting and her journal writing show a covert move towards independence - independence of thought and expression. With respect to her painting, there is a striking contrast between the landscapes she presents to the public eye with a view to making money and her private

pencil sketches accidentally left unerased on the back of some of these. In the freshness of her love for Arthur Huntingdon, she lightly sketches his face, which is attractive and pleasing to her, on the back of a number of her formal paintings. She is extremely humiliated by his conceited discovery of these, which predates his proposal of marriage.³⁴

In their (in-?) famous and vociferous defense of women writers in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar write as follows on Helen as artist:

she uses her art both to express and to camouflage herself. But this functionally ambiguous aesthetic is not merely a result of her flight from home and husband. For even earlier in the novel, when we encounter Helen before her marriage, her use of art is duplicitous. Her painting and drawing seem at first simply to be genteel social accomplishments, but when she shows one of her paintings to her future husband, he discovers a pencil sketch of his own face on the back of the canvas. Helen has been using the reverse side of her paintings to express her secret desires ...

In the figure of Helen Graham, Anne Brontë has given us a wonderfully useful paradigm of the female artist.... she produces a public art which she herself rejects as inadequate but which she secretly uses to discover a new aesthetic space for herself.

(1984:81-2)

This is the kind of gender consciousness which one finds made explicit in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as opposed to the veiled implications in *Wuthering Heights* and the occasionally ambiguous tones of Charlotte's feminism. The way the 'female artist' is presented here by Gilbert and Gubar reveals the extent to which the depiction of Helen Graham as artist typifies what the Brontës themselves were doing. They employed androgynous pseudonyms, used complicated narrative framing

devices and frequently contrived ambiguous endings to their novels. Art - in their case, specifically fiction - was used to make complex points about female identity, its social constructedness, and the consequent need for masking devices of various kinds. The very fact that contemporary readers and critics judged the Bells/Brontës more harshly if their identity as women were to be confirmed³⁵ proves the prejudice of the age.

As internal narrator, Helen is revealed in the following extract from the embedded journal as articulate, perceptually clear, and acutely aware of her motivations, loyalties, identifications, doubts and fears. She describes her growing friendship with Mr Hargrave and acknowledges her sense of obligation to him but admits to feeling uneasy:

... my heart whispered all was not right, and brought a glow to my face, which he heightened by his steady, serious gaze, while, by his manner of receiving those acknowledgments, he more than doubled my misgivings....

And indeed, I know not whether at the time, it was not for *him* [her husband] rather than myself that I blushed; for, since he and I are one, I so identify myself with him, that I feel his degradation, his failings, and transgressions as my own; I blush for him, I fear for him; I repent for him, weep, pray, and feel for him as for myself; but I cannot act for him; and hence, I must be and I am debased, *contaminated by the union*, both in my own eyes, and in the actual truth. I am so determined to love him - so intensely anxious to excuse his errors, that I am continually dwelling upon them, and labouring to extenuate the loosest of his principles and the worst of his practices, till I am *familiarized with vice* and almost a *partaker in his sins*.

(My emphasis; 1985:273-74)

What is presented here is an inability to separate herself from her husband, which suggests a lack of ego boundaries at

this stage of their relationship. (This makes her later development in assuming an identity independent of him all the more significant.) Helen is seen to identify with her husband to the extent that she feels 'contaminated' by his vices. Her concern is with the implications for her Christian and moral life:

Things that formerly shocked and disgusted me, now seem only natural. I know them to be wrong, because reason and God's word declare them to be so; but I am gradually losing that instinctive horror and repulsion which was given me by nature, or instilled into me by the precepts and example of my aunt. Perhaps, then, I was too severe in my judgments, for I abhorred the sinner as well as the sin; now, I flatter myself I am more charitable and considerate; but am I not becoming more indifferent and insensate too? Fool that I was to dream that I had strength and purity enough to save myself and him! Yet, God preserve me from it! - and him too. Yes, poor Arthur, I will still hope and pray for you; and though I write as if you were some abandoned wretch, past hope and past reprieve, it is only my anxious fears - my strong desires - that make me do so; one who loved you less would be less bitter - less dissatisfied.

(1985:274)

This is largely moral and religious self-reflection, as Helen examines herself in the light of her Christian conviction, but towards the end of this extract the narratee is no longer her own inner self but her husband. Her need to communicate with him and her certainty of not being understood are both evident in this passage. She employs the language of anguish, using terms she no doubt wished her husband could relate to.

With regard to the presentation of the development of Markham and Helen Huntingdon's relationship,³⁶ that she is a match for him in argument and debate is made clear. That her (to her son) 'incomprehensible discourse' is designed to

challenge the point of view of the self-satisfied narrator is evident from an early exchange between them:

'I beg your pardon, Mrs Graham - but you get on too fast. I have not yet said that a boy should be taught to rush into the snares of life, - or even wilfully to seek temptation for the sake of exercising his virtue by overcoming it; - I only say that it is better to arm and strengthen your hero, than to disarm and enfeeble the foe; - and if you were to rear an oak sapling in a hothouse, tending it carefully night and day, and shielding it from every breath of wind, you could not expect it to become a hardy tree, like that which has grown up on the mountain-side, exposed to all the action of the elements, and not even sheltered from the shock of the tempest.'

'Granted; - but would you use the same argument with regard to a girl?'

'Certainly not.'

(1985:56)

The conventional employment of stereotypical double standards by Markham is challenged by Helen and she in her person, as well as in the manuscript of her diary, will continue to challenge these. The reader may expect the challenge to continue well into their eventual marriage. Helen Huntingdon's views about the importance and validity of learning from the experience of others clearly reflect those held by Anne Brontë herself and articulated in her Preface, as already pointed out.³⁷ Markham's descriptions of his fond mother's dotings and the journalled presentations by Helen of Mrs Hargrave's attitudes and behaviour contain implicit and explicit criticism respectively of double standards in child rearing - when boys are spoilt and indulged, with no expense spared, and girls neglected or made to wait upon their brothers.

Throughout this novel the written word is privileged over

the spoken. Huntingdon, for instance, never so clearly discovers his wife's feelings and intentions as when he reads her journal. Likewise, what Markham has read both of Helen's journal and of her letters to her brother gives him reason to disbelieve Eliza Millward's careless (and envious) conveying of community gossip.

'To employ a journal as a device for shared experience underscores the power of the printed word and its effects upon the reader' (Kostka, 1992:46). Langland also makes the pertinent point that

Anne Brontë has made 'authority' in story-telling a key issue. The oral tale here has a free circulation without accountability whereas the written story has an agent who may be held accountable. The novel is alive with rumour, scandal, conjecture, slander, gossip - various kinds of oral reports - and they are largely discredited or, at least, highly suspect. Because Helen Graham herself is the most frequent subject of such 'free' discourse, we are forced to hold it suspect and more fully credit the written account with all its gestures toward verification.

(1989:121)

The unreliability of oral sources (as opposed to written) is reinforced when his former partner in flirtation, Eliza Millward, torments Markham with the 'news' that Helen is 'going to be married next Thursday!':

'... I only "tell the tale as 'twas told to me": I don't vouch for the truth of it; but at the same time, I don't see what reason Sarah should have for deceiving me, or her informant for deceiving her; and that was what she told me the footman told her ...'

Markham himself provides the name of the 'groom'. Eliza gropes, 'a Mr - oh dear! - Mr - ':

'Hargrave?' suggested I, with a bitter smile.

'You're right!' cried she, 'that was the very name.'
 'Impossible, Miss Eliza!!' I exclaimed, in a tone that
 made her start.

(1985:463)

Markham's vehemence derives from the authority with which he feels confident the reading of Helen's journal has invested him. At first he is '[d]etermined at once to prove the truth - or rather the falsehood - of her [Eliza's] story' yet soon he doubts: again the source of mischief would be the power of the oral to misrepresent the 'truth':

It struck me that someone might have belied me to her: perhaps her brother - yes, no doubt her brother had persuaded her that I was false and faithless, and taking advantage of her natural indignation, and perhaps her desponding carelessness about her future life, had urged her, artfully, cruelly on, to this other marriage in order to secure her from me.

(1985:464-5)

It is only in a direct and face to face confrontation with him that Helen will assure him of her love.³⁸

* * *

In the presentation of the dying Huntingdon, there is a significant juxtaposition of Helen's point of view³⁹ and Markham's candid confession to his brother-in-law of his far less holy motivation. In Markham's account of his visits to Lawrence during Helen's sojourn at her husband's bedside, he explains why, though he might enquire after Helen, he did not enquire after her husband 'though I might be burning to know; because I had not the hypocrisy to profess any anxiety for his recovery, and I had not the face to express any desire for a contrary result' (1985:443). He then provides his

'justification ... - a few of the excuses, at least, wherewith I sought to pacify my own accusing conscience'. These basically pertain to the uselessness of Huntingdon's existence and the misery his continued life must inevitably be causing Helen, the 'angel by his side' (1985:444). The narrator's unconvincing parenthetical '(leaving myself entirely out of the question)' only serves to contrast his obvious self-interest with Helen's selflessness, duty-bound and therefore unspontaneous as it may be. Markham's self-interest shows up Helen's selflessness by contrast. It also raises the continual question of whether Markham is worthy of Helen.

According to Helen's own description, her empathy for her dying husband is sincere and her concern for his eternal salvation paramount. At a given point Huntingdon seems 'suddenly struck with the appalling aspect of that terrible event;'

'Helen, you *must* save me!' And he earnestly seized my hand, and looked into my face with such imploring eagerness that my heart bled for him, and I could not speak for tears.'

Even if she is confident in the ultimate achievement of this state for everyone, Helen as internal narrator in her letters to her brother presents herself as desirous to save him as much suffering in the afterlife as possible through encouraging him to adopt better attitudes ('widely altered ... tastes and feelings') in the here and now. The question of what would have happened if Arthur did repent and then recover is never addressed - Helen would presumably have continued to

play the part of the dutiful wife. What would have happened if he recovered without repenting is also a ghastly option left unexplored.

With respect to the ending of the novel, the withdrawal of Helen as internal narrator in the form of the abrupt ending of her diary precedes the withdrawal of the focus on her feelings regarding her new marriage partner. Scott has a point in this instance, when he speculates on what 'Helen's journal, her innermost confession, [might] reveal, were it confided once more to us', for 'how can life be easy with a hysterical egotist who always bullishly insists on having his own way?' But such a comment of course reflects the danger of speculation and of treating fictional constructs as characters who live beyond the pages of the novel. Scott sympathizes with Lawrence whom he regards as having done 'everything this side of fair play to inhibit and prevent Helen's second courtship'. However, Scott reveals an interesting angle related to the question of women's options - an issue partially explored in Chapter 1, above, as Jane Austen plays with possibilities in *Pride and Prejudice* - when he attempts to view the issue from Helen's point of view, whose journal after all we no longer have access to:

Yet despite her brother's scant approbation, what else is she to do, the widow of Grassdale Manor? After her husband's death she makes her suitor wait a long time (some fourteen months) before re-marrying; and she has cause enough to take the step. The alternative is to leave her little son, now growing up, fatherless; to become a sort of dried-up old maid, still young though she is in her tale of years; and to refuse the addresses

of a man to whom she is attracted, in a world where there is not so much social mobility or choice.

(1983:96-97)

There is indeed a veil of mystery cast about Helen's innermost feelings by this stage, a sense created by the particular narrative techniques used. Helen's letters to her brother have been read at one remove, as it were, by Markham, and therefore at two removes by the reader of Markham's 'letter' to his brother-in-law. In these letters, as also in embedded narratives like her diary, she has still been an internal narrator, but in these communications she addresses herself to her brother, rather than being engaged in dialogue with herself. Exactly how she feels about Markham, to what extent she has changed her mind since her early encounters with him, and to what extent she is happy to be married to him, are questions not precisely addressed and certainly not precisely answered.

The absence of comment by Helen after the death of Arthur may invite one to conclude that indeed Helen and Markham's marriage could and should be viewed as a happy one, as one bears in mind the advice Helen offered Esther Hargrave during her unhappy first marriage: 'You might as well sell yourself to slavery at once, as marry a man you dislike' (1985:380).⁴⁰ It appears to be the intention of the novel that as Markham reads the woman's story he should be educated, humbled, challenged and transformed to the extent that by the end of Helen's first year as a genuine widow, he is deemed to be a

suitable match for Helen. Yet there are hints that there is some ambivalence regarding this issue.

Firstly, Frederick Lawrence's reservations about him are made apprent on a number of occasions, up to and including his own marriage to Esther Hargrave. The text suggests that he deliberately sent out late notification of his own wedding to Markham, possibly simply because he did not want his presence at the wedding but probably also because he was not wanting to facilitate another meeting between Markham and his sister Helen.

The ambivalence of the ending lies in the character of Gilbert Markham. Markham's maturity is certainly called into question. Critics (such as Eagleton, Kostka, and Scott)⁴¹ reveal a range of opinion on Markham's relative maturity by the end of the novel. Scott is the most outspoken of these, while Kostka thinks highly of Markham's capacity to grow:

Not only does Gilbert feel the indignation and suffocation Helen feels, he also undergoes a transformation that is effected through several dimensions. Reading forces him into solitude ... Solitude becomes populated by visions and images that are charged with emotion. Gilbert not only sympathizes, he empathizes in his empathy and absorption, Gilbert encounters a dimension which provides him not only with change, but also with a new vision and a freshly acquired maturity....

What has launched him into adulthood has not been the experience of male order and reason, but rather the reading of male disorder and unreason as written by a woman.

(My italics; 1992:46-47)

There is no doubt that the death of her husband Arthur

Huntingdon brings Helen a release from the shackles of an unhappy marriage. That she wants to marry Markham the concluding chapter of the novel makes equally clear. Whether she is gaining a satisfactory partner is what some critics feel is left unresolved. Is the reader to deduce that Markham is transformed as he reads the inner drama of a woman's story? Violence - as can be seen in his assault on Lawrence - remains a disconcertingly present option to him. At a later stage false pride keeps him from writing to Helen, or from approaching Lawrence for her address. Even when he finally meets her, pride (or false modesty) keeps him from asking for her hand. On the occasion of their actual meeting, Markham behaves in a strangely clumsy way. The more positive interpretation of his behaviour would be that reading Helen's story helped him gain some humility (previously lacking) and that his recent discovery of her great wealth has made him self-conscious. A less generous interpretation would be that false pride is responsible for his behaviour. Also, it could simply be that he has such a low emotional intelligence that he does not even pick up Helen's cues. She resorts to thrusting her heart at him in the form of a Christmas rose, which due to his indecision she then snatches and hurls out of the window before he awakens to her symbolism.⁴² To my mind there is immaturity both in his behaviour and in his writing right up to the end of the novel.

There is also the possibility that Anne Brontë herself

simply lacked the maturity as author to depict a male character with conviction. Her clearest model of a young man was Branwell, not a very encouraging model. Her depiction of Arthur Huntingdon, debauched, alcoholic, degraded, adulterous, is more convincing than that of Gilbert Markham, a rake reformed by reading a woman's story. Finally, the important question from a feminist point of view of whether solitude and independence for Helen would not have been the preferable option is not fully resolved.

In conclusion, then, in both *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Wuthering Heights* conventionality is exploded in various ways. As McCarthy points out, Lockwood's rubbing of the ghost of Cathy's wrists on the window-pane shows that the 'polite, civilized gentleman, is capable, albeit in a dream, of greater cruelty than any of the savage inhabitants of *Wuthering Heights*' (1981:54). Catherine and Hareton - admittedly both tamed - find each other in a loving relationship as equals. In *The Tenant* Helen Huntingdon in her diary (the inner narrative frame embedded within Markham's narrative) and in her behaviour explodes myths of male superiority and domination represented in different ways by both Gilbert Markham and Arthur Huntingdon. The former's unflattering self-revelations are contained in the outer frame and the horrors associated with the latter's degradation are exposed by Helen within the second, inner framework. As with *Villette*, the ending of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is not without ambiguity.

The important point for this study, however, as it deals with the intersection between feminism and narration as strategy, is that Helen's articulated, formally written interior monologues provide an unusual demonstration of the way a woman's voice is made to be heard. Instead of Helen Huntingdon being the object of Markham's gaze (as she was in church, in an early chapter), she becomes the subject of her own story.

ENDNOTES

1. In his Introduction to the Penguin edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.
2. This is the contention of Chitham (1983), Langland (1989) and Spark (1993), among others.
3. Both Agnes Grey and Jane Eyre are also governesses.
4. Mary Jacobus argues this point convincingly in *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, 1986:41-61.
5. Elizabeth Langland (1989), among others, forcibly makes this point.
6. See, in particular, Beth Newman's 'The Situation of the Looker-On': Gender, Narration, and Gaze in *Wuthering Heights*. *PMLA* 105 (5), October, 1990.
7. In her Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell (19 September 1850) published as preface to the reprint of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* after the deaths of Emily and Anne Charlotte claimed that Anne 'wanted the power, the fire, the originality of her sister' and that 'a constitutional reserve and taciturnity placed and kept her in the shade, and covered her mind, and especially her feelings, with a sort of nun-like veil, which was rarely lifted'.
8. Though *Lady Susan* was not published, Jane Austen had already conceived of the idea.
9. The full text of the Preface is contained in the Appendix on pp. 287-90 below.
10. Especially the graphic deathbed scene of Arthur Huntingdon, referred to on pp. 110-12 of this chapter, forcibly suggests this.
11. At the possibility of a reprint of the novel Charlotte writes dismissively to W.S. Williams:

'Wildfell Hall' it hardly appears to me desirable to preserve. The choice of subject in that work is a mistake - it was too little consonant with the character - tastes and ideas of the gentle, retiring, inexperienced writer. She wrote it under a strange, conscientious, half-ascetic notion of accomplishing a painful penance and a severe duty.

(5 September 1850; Wise & Symington, eds, vol. 3, 1933:156)

12. Far from setting out to make readers more moral, *Wuthering Heights* in its own way exalts evil, particularly in the sense in which Bataille describes it, 'Evil [as] the most powerful means of exposing passion' (1985:17). Heathcliff in this sense is the most powerful, passionate and 'evil' male character in the Brontës' fiction. In his chapter on Emily Brontë Bataille writes:

Since death is the condition of life, Evil, which is essentially cognate with death, is also, in a somewhat ambiguous manner, a basis of existence....

Evil, seen in the light of a disinterested attraction towards death, differs from the evil based on self-interest. A 'foul' criminal deed is contrary to a 'passionate' one. The law rejects both of them, but truly humane literature is the high point of passion. Yet passion does not go without a curse: ... The curse is the necessary path for true blessing.

(1985:29-30)

Bataille's point that 'Evil ... is essentially cognate with death' takes on added significance when one bears in mind that four deaths have occurred by the end of Chapter 9 and no fewer than eight by the end of the novel, including those of major characters, most notably Cathy and Heathcliff. It is well known that neither Charlotte nor Anne could sleep after listening to Emily's reading of *Wuthering Heights*. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, on the other hand, leaves very little scope for ambivalence or equivocation - Good and Evil are very clearly differentiated and death viewed as a way out of evil if necessary.

13. These will be explored in the following two chapters.

14. P.J.M. Scott, whose work at times reads like a Sunday sermon, describes the relationship between *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Wuthering Heights* - and its causes - as follows:

Such use of narrations which are like Chinese boxes one within another for certain of the novel's essential effects adds strength to Mr Chitham's (and others') view that in various ways *The Tenant* parodies, in criticizing, *Wuthering Heights*. We know that Anne was at first dismayed, then philosophically resilient, under the discovery that she and Emily, in their early time inseparable twins in feeling and thought, had grown radically apart, as to their visions of life and correspondent ethos.

(1983:112-3)

15. A great deal of money was invested in Branwell's rather than his sisters' education, and his habits of self-indulgence and idleness caused him to be a great disappointment, and to die an early death.

16. Certainly neither Charlotte nor Emily resemble Austen in any way, nor did they aspire to. Charlotte's comment on Austen in a letter to George Henry Lewes is well known:

Why do you like Miss Austen so very much? I am puzzled on that point ... I had not seen *Pride and Prejudice* till I read that sentence of yours, and then I got the book. And what did I find? An accurate daguerreotyped portrait of a commonplace face; a carefully-fenced, highly cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers - but no glance of a bright, vivid physiognomy - no open country - no fresh air - no blue hill - no bonny beck. I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen, in their elegant but confined houses.

(12 January 1848; Wise & Symington, eds, vol. 2, 1933:178-79)

17. Chitham too compares Anne Brontë to Jane Austen, providing her different life experiences from her sisters' as an explanation: 'Ever since her experiences at Thorp Green she exhibited in all she wrote a view of life much more realistic, much more socially orientated, closer to Jane Austen or George Eliot than to Emily, or for that matter Charlotte' (1983:92).

18. Jane Austen's famous adage that it 'is wrong to marry for money but foolish to marry without it' springs to mind here.

19. This point is made convincingly by Beth Newman who comments as follows on *Wuthering Heights*:

What Brontë imagines, then, is a defusing of the gaze: not a simple inversion in which the woman is permitted to turn the table with an appropriating look back but a destruction of the hierarchical positioning of male and female that the gendered gaze entails.

(1990:1037)

The example she cites to illustrate the levelling effect she is referring to is the presentation of Catherine's and Hareton's eyes as being 'precisely similar' (Nelly's comment, 'their eyes ... are those of Catherine Earnshaw', 1972:254). And Newman also equates Lockwood and Nelly across any gender division, commenting most aptly, 'For all the power Lockwood's and Nelly's gazes arrogate, they end in impotence' (1990:1039). Nelly and Lockwood of course have a lot in common, most notably their own passionless characters.

20. This point has already been raised on pp.83-84 above.

21. This argument only works if one interprets the character of Gilbert Markham as showing marked improvement on reading Helen's diary. Those critics (including Edith Kostka, whose views will be considered later) who see him as irredeemably immature would disagree. Of himself Markham writes as follows:

Perhaps, too, I was a little bit spoiled by my mother and sister, and some other ladies of my acquaintance; - and yet, I was by no means a fop - of that I am fully convinced, whether you [Halford, his brother-in-law, to whom the whole of this epistle is addressed] are or not.

(1985:58)

22. Again, I am aware that this is a controversial statement in the context of those critics' arguments that Gilbert is and remains irredeemably immature.

23. As readers we never encounter Halford directly but we are able to deduce that he eventually marries Gilbert's sister Rose.

24. Frederick Lawrence, for instance, is a fairly idealized male character according to the standards Anne sets up. Close as he is to his sister Helen and aware of her ordeal, he is presented as likely to make a very kind and considerate husband to Esther Hargrave.

25. In his *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës*, Terry Eagleton pays Anne rather backhanded compliments: 'For such a resolutely moral writer, Anne Brontë is remarkably unsmug' (1975:124). He adds that the

language of Anne Brontë's work is that of morality rather than imagination: her fiction is concerned neither with submerged depths nor with far horizons, but with the criteria by which men and women should act well. And yet, if this voids her writing of the high drama of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, imbuing her first book with a greyness candidly acknowledged in the title, it does not involve some prudish shirking of real issues. If her work lacks the brio of Emily's, it also lacks the compromise of Charlotte's; if it shares Charlotte's anxious autobiographical realism, it also shares Emily's sense of certain conflicts in which no accommodation is possible. If Anne is in every sense more charitable than Charlotte, she is in other ways almost as toughly clear-sighted as Emily.

(1975:137-38)

Eagleton - no doubt because of his very explicit Marxist emphasis - criticises Anne for writing about individuals rather than class representatives (as according to him Emily

does in *Wuthering Heights*) but perhaps fails to appreciate her spiritual emphasis where each soul is presented as uniquely accountable to God.

26. It seems noticeable that neither Gilbert Markham (the 'hero') nor Arthur Huntingdon (the anti-hero) share the focus on their Creator which the heroine displays.

27. Beatrice Webb articulates the question of the nature and identity of the addressee in a journal:

It would be curious to discover who it is, to whom one writes in a diary? Possibly to some mysterious personification of one's own identity, to the Unknown, which lies below the constant change in matter and ideas, constituting the individual at any given moment. This unknown was once my only friend; the being to whom I went for advice and consolation in all the small troubles of a child's life.

(Cited in Spacks, 1976:366)

And then again Spacks herself on the autobiographical writings of Lillian Hellman and Anaïs Nin:

The ordering of experience in memoir or diary, the implicit assertion that this life makes sense, seems in these cases a way for the author to remind herself of the value of her own experience, to hold on to the meaning of her life.

(1976:393)

28. This method also surely challenges the allegation that Markham's reading of Helen's journal does not present her marital experience with sufficient immediacy, an allegation made by Gérin, Moore and others, and discussed on pp. 90-92 above.

29. Cf. Jane Fairfax in *Emma*.

30. Cf. Frances Henri in *The Professor* expressing her aversion 'to be kept by you, Monsieur'. Also in *Shirley* - Caroline (without means) and Shirley (wealthy) wish to be able to take their place beside men in the world of work. Pride and independence emerge as preoccupations of women whom society attempts to cast into the mould of submission and dependence. Mary Wollstonecraft expressed herself very emphatically on this issue in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (cited in endnote 32).

31. Cf. Proverbs 19:13: A wife's quarrelling is a continual dripping of rain.

32. The paragraph in its entirety reads:

Men have superiour [sic] strength of body; but were it not for mistaken notions of beauty, women would acquire sufficient to enable them to earn their own subsistence, the true definition of independence; and to bear those bodily inconveniencies and exertions that are requisite to strengthen the mind.

(Wollstonecraft, 1975:85)

33. This phrase is taken from George Eliot whose views on this point are reflected in the following letter:

We women are always in danger of living too exclusively in the affections; and though our affections are perhaps the best gifts we have, we ought also to have our share of the more independent life - some joy in things for their own sake. It is piteous to see the helplessness of some sweet women when their affections are disappointed! - because all their teaching has been, that they can only delight in study of any kind for the sake of a personal love. They have never contemplated an independent delight in ideas as an experience which they could confess without being laughed at. Yet surely women need this sort of defence against passionate affliction even more than men.

(Cited in Patricia Spacks, 1976:51)

Spacks here sees Eliot as concerned with 'the unendurable pain of emotions unqualified by ideas, the doom of one unavoidably committed to the life of feeling.'

34. Chapter 18, 'The Miniature' (1985:168-79), presents these instances of discovery as well as Helen's eventual tearing a sketch of her suitor in two: 'To show him how I valued it, I tore it in two, and threw it into the fire' (1985:177). Gilbert and Gubar comment that 'Helen has been using the reverse side of her paintings to express her secret desires' (1984:81), which is clearly also the interpretation of the 'delighted' Arthur Huntingdon, who 'complacently gaz[ed] at the back of the picture - It was his own face that [Helen] had sketched there and forgotten to rub out!' (1985:171).

35. This is borne out by Anne Brontë in her Preface (see pp. 287-90 below) as well.

36. At this point she is known as Mrs Graham, which raises the question of multiple identities.

37. See pp. 81-82 above.

38. This is discussed on p. 115 of this chapter.

39. Her point of view is reflected primarily in her letters to her brother from which extracts of dialogue have been cited above.

40. Arlene Jackson makes the following distinction between Charlotte, Emily and Anne's ways of dealing (or not) 'with the female half of an unhappy marriage':

Neither Charlotte nor Emily deal with the female half of an unhappy marriage, particularly marriage with such a one as an Arthur Huntingdon. Both sisters, however, indicate they are well aware of long-suffering wives in the admittedly quite different situation surrounding Isabella Linton as Heathcliff's wife, and the potential awaiting Jane if she were to marry either Rochester (as bigamist) or St John Rivers (as missionary). Neither author handles the issue as Anne Brontë does: she concentrates her energies on Helen's story, and through the means of framework and journal, we are able to study causation and development of stress. Significantly, the journal allows the subject to comment on and analyze the reactions and changes in her own personality.

(1982:204)

41. Eagleton (1975) in *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës*, Kostka (1992) in 'Narrative Experience as a Means to Maturity in Anne Brontë's Victorian Novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*', *Connecticut Review*, 14(2), 41-47 and Scott (1983) in *Anne Brontë: A New Critical Assessment*.

42. Langland brings out the tension in this text between the narration by Gilbert and the focalization by Helen as it occurs in this passage as well:

...although Gilbert is narrating, Helen is the focalizer of the scene....She has focalized the meaning of this event. Her wishes dominate; he is *subject to her desire*, and he is the *object of her desire*.

(1992:122)

CHAPTER THREE

WOMEN'S WRITING: 'FACTS' VERSUS FICTION, WITH REFERENCE TO CHARLOTTE BRONTË

The career of Charlotte Brontë offers a striking example of the conflict, common to women writers, between the cultural pressure toward feminine duty and the independence and assertiveness that imaginative writing requires.

(Carol Christ, 1990:61)

An exploration of Charlotte Brontë's work and life reveals how her ambivalences are reflected in her narrative strategies. I believe that contradictions in Charlotte Brontë's thoughts and feelings about women's position in society are reflected in her novels and implicit also in her choices and uses of narrative strategies.

In this chapter some of the attitudes women writers of the period had to contend with both in themselves and others are highlighted. Typically female experiences are brought to light in an examination of the self-perceptions¹ of Gaskell and of Brontë (who is herself the subject of Gaskell's biography). The narrative perspectives adopted in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* by Elizabeth Gaskell and in *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography* and *Shirley* by Charlotte Brontë are also compared with a view to establishing the commonality between identity creation in biography and fiction.

In an exploration of the dynamics of the author-narrator-character triangle, Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell offer interesting comparisons and contrasts between 'factual' biography and fictional autobiography, in women's writing. Of particular interest is the exercise in control with which the

act of writing provides women, that is, the empowerment which comes from adopting the stance of narrator in a society which in numerous other ways disempowered women. The very fact that critics judged a work differently if deemed to be written by a woman rather than a man is evidence of this fact.²

In correspondence both Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell expressed their need for freedom in terms of their desire for 'wings', 'wings such as wealth can furnish', in Charlotte's case. After receiving letters from Mary Taylor describing 'pictures the most exquisite, cathedrals the most venerable' in Europe, Charlotte writes to her most intimate friend Ellen Nussey:

I hardly know what swelled to my throat as I read her letter: such a vehement impatience of restraint and steady work; such a strong wish for wings - wings such as wealth can furnish; such an urgent thirst to see, to know, to learn; something internal seemed to expand bodily for a minute. I was tantalised by the consciousness of faculties unexercised, - then all collapsed, and I despaired.

The force of the inner conflict is evident from the physical nature of her reaction as she describes it, as well as from the almost ashamed confession which follows this expression of her desire for freedom:

My dear, I would hardly make that confession to any one but yourself; and to you, rather in a letter than *viva voce*. These rebellious and absurd emotions were only momentary; I quelled them in five minutes. I hope they will not revive, for they were acutely painful.

(Gaskell, 1985:216-17)

The physical and emotional pain of this yearning for freedom, for an expansion of geographical and mental horizons, is held

in check, it seems to me, or balanced, and contained, by 'that single, absorbing, exquisite gratification' (1985:174) which in a letter to Robert Southey is how Charlotte refers to writing.

Elizabeth Gaskell also confessed that she wished she had the 'wings of a bird ... but as I am a woman instead of a bird' she laments that she cannot simply up and fly away as she would like to do. She writes a letter to a male writer friend expressing envy that he has a whole library to himself in which to write: 'Oh, how I would write!', she exclaims, hemmed in as she is on all sides by the demands of being a mother, a Unitarian minister's wife, and a housekeeper, perhaps in part deceiving herself that this would necessarily be a more productive situation for her. At other times, of course, she recognizes that all these domestic demands in fact fuel her vocation as writer.³

At a later stage, in 1862, somewhat disingenuously, Elizabeth Gaskell offers advice to a young aspiring female writer:

The exercise of a talent or power is always a great pleasure; but one should weigh well whether this pleasure may not be obtained by the sacrifice of some duty. When I had little children I do not think I could have written stories, because I should have become too much absorbed in my fictitious people to attend to my real ones.

(Jenny Uglow, 1993:127)

Yet as her biographer points out, 'she herself had never really stopped writing stories when her children were small[:]
... the nurturing of real and fictitious people was

inextricably linked - both "absorbed" the woman - and although they seemed to compete, it was the experience of being "a wife and mother", she felt, that brought out the writer's "gift" (Uglow, 1993:128).

The multifaceted nature of her existence is well summarized in a letter on her feelings after buying a family home in Plymouth Grove in which she expresses her fears of extravagance:

that is the haunting thought to me; at least to one of my 'Mes', for I have a great number and that's the plague. One of my mes is, I do believe, a true Christian - (only people call her socialist and communist), another of my mes is a wife and mother, and highly delighted at the delight of everyone else in the house... Now that's my 'social' self I suppose. Then again I've another self with a full taste for beauty and convenience [which] is pleased on its own account. How am I to reconcile all these warring members? I try to drown myself (my *first* self), by saying it's [William] who is to decide on all these things, and his feeling it right ought to be my rule. And so it is - only that does not quite do.

(J.A.V. Chapple & Arthur Pollard, eds, 1966:108)

Elizabeth Gaskell's awareness of her own inner complexity is perhaps one of the reasons for her tremendous aversion to the thought of anyone ever attempting to write her biography.⁴ Yet for the purpose of her didactic intention, her own impulse in writing the biography of Charlotte Brontë seems to be to simplify her sister-author's life, which was certainly at least as complex as her own.

In both Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and in Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, the narrator exercises control over the fictional or 'factual' heroines they are presenting. Some of the similarities and differences in their

methods result from the different constraints under which they are operating. Elizabeth Gaskell felt the strain of writing a biography as opposed to a novel, and she was constrained by the 'facts' of her heroine's life; as well as by the fact that other 'characters' in her book were still living.⁵ Charlotte Brontë placed herself voluntarily under other constraints in choosing the form of fictional autobiography, that is, first-person narration. While the book is now published simply as *Jane Eyre*, it is important to bear in mind that Charlotte Brontë sub-titled it 'An Autobiography'. Charlotte's sub-title indicates her conception of it. Gaskell herself felt aware of the different expectations and demands placed on a writer of biography as opposed to fiction and expressed herself in the following terms:

And I never did write a biography, and I don't exactly know how to set about it; you see you have to be accurate and keep to facts; a most difficult thing for a writer of fiction. And then the style too! that is a bugbear. It must be grander and more correct, I am afraid. But in all matters of style and accuracy I have a capital helper in my husband...

(Chapple, 1992:71)

Despite her aspirations to write in a 'grander and more correct' style, Gaskell as narrator never keeps her reader or her subject at arm's length for long. Signs of the formality she considered desirable are evident when she sporadically refers to 'Miss Brontë' rather than 'Charlotte' but more usually her warm, persuasive, even moralistic and didactic attitude to her reader prevails, as in the opening sentence of Chapter II:

For a right understanding of the life of my dear friend, Charlotte Brontë, it appears to me more necessary in her case than in most others, that the reader should be made acquainted with the peculiar forms of population and society amidst which her earliest years were passed, and from which both her own and her sisters' first impressions of human life must have been received.

(1985:60)

Gaskell clearly takes very seriously the responsibility of moulding the reader's attitude. The obviousness of her attempt to do so may even cause resistance in a postmodern reader.

In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* Gaskell entrusts to herself as narrator the delicate task of presenting sympathetically - as this is her bias - the 'factual' life story of a fellow woman writer and admired friend. Gaskell in life stood in an interesting relationship to Charlotte Brontë - she respected what she regarded as Brontë's superior powers as an author but simultaneously felt protective towards her younger, single, socially gauche 'sister'. This twofold attitude resulted in an interpretative slant in her writing, discernible in the particular tone which she adopts towards her biographical subject. At times it is admiring, at times patronizing, as seen in the following extract:

Miss Brontë's health continued such, that she could not apply herself to writing as she wished, for many weeks after the serious attack from which she had suffered. There was not very much to cheer her in the few events that touched her interests during this time.... As far as she could see, her life was ordained to be lonely, and she must subdue her nature to her life, and, if possible, bring the two into harmony. When she could employ herself in fiction, all was comparatively well. The characters were her companions in the quiet hours, which she spent utterly alone, unable often to stir out of doors for many days together. The interests of the persons in her novels, supplied the lack of interest in her own life;

and Memory and Imagination found their appropriate work and ceased to prey upon her vitals. But too frequently she could not write, could not see her people, nor hear them speak....

(1985:469-70)

On the one hand, she assumes the giftedness of Brontë the novelist despite the difficulties and limitations of her circumstances; on the other hand, she adopts a compassionate attitude towards the motives and purposes of her biographical subject. Her own stance as narrator is thus far from neutral or objective; she is swayed by different impulses in relation to a fellow woman writer's work and life, two aspects which she separates in her analysis of Brontë:

... Charlotte Brontë's existence becomes divided into two parallel currents - her life as Currer Bell, the author; her life as Charlotte Brontë, the woman. There were separate duties belonging to each character - not opposing each other; not impossible, but difficult to be reconciled.

(1985:334)

Gaskell's denotation of two separate identities, one male and one female, illustrates this as the basis of her view of Charlotte in contrast to herself:

Gaskell suggests that this splitting of the self in order to shore up a masculine fiction of transcendent artistic autonomy, and the accompanying failure to integrate duty and creativity, explains the peculiar pathology of Brontë's life and work. With her own pronounced irreverence toward male literary giants of her time and her refusal to sacrifice feminine values at the altar of masculine genius, Gaskell would seem to have represented a genuinely alternative literary perspective - exhorting women to 'Get Strong' and exercise social power - to the tortured example of Charlotte Brontë.

(Deirdre d'Albertis, 1997:31)

D'Albertis depicts Gaskell as the assertive, 'strong' woman writer and Brontë's life and work as pathological. This

interpretation is questioned in the analysis of the novels that follow rather than borne out. However, it remains an interesting angle on Gaskell's depiction of Brontë in the *Life*. The occasional authorial intrusions, or narrative interventions, illustrate the gentle self-consciousness of tone in Gaskell's presentation of her female subject.

Gaskell noted Robert Southey's famous reply to Charlotte's letter requesting advice on her writing career in which he stated categorically: 'Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be' (1985:173). Gaskell claims: 'It is partly because I think it so admirable, and partly because it tends to bring out her character, as shown in the following reply, that I have taken the liberty of inserting the above extracts from it.' Gaskell interprets Charlotte's response to Southey as illustrative of her self-denial. In it Charlotte appears to be accepting Southey's advice and submitting herself to her father. While admitting that writing to her is 'that single, absorbing, exquisite gratification', Charlotte goes on to commit herself to endeavour

not only attentively to observe all the duties a woman ought to fulfil, but to feel deeply interested in them. I don't always succeed, for sometimes when I'm teaching or sewing I would rather be reading or writing; but my father's approbation amply rewarded me for the privation.
(Gaskell, 1985:174-75)

Contemporary readers, however, detect irony in her tone.⁶ A closer look at the formality of the language suggests that Charlotte found precious little genuine compensation for her

sacrifice in her father's 'approbation'. The formality of expression evident in the latter part of the sentence suggests that Charlotte is mouthing what she felt she ought to feel rather than expressing her true sentiments. A more heartfelt and literary response to Southey may well be veiled in the following extract from *Jane Eyre*:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.
(1996:123)

This is an articulate and confident refutation of Southey's views.

Gaskell as narrator allows herself fervent expressions of both judgment and sympathy for her biographical subject's particular plight as a woman. There was never any question in the Brontë household that such little funds as were available should be used for Branwell's education rather than his sisters'. After the death of the eldest sister Elizabeth, whom Charlotte admired and adored, Branwell was the sibling to whom Charlotte was closest. Her sense of Branwell's growing unworthiness was therefore all the more keen. Gaskell does not mince her words: 'These are not the first sisters who have laid their lives as a sacrifice before their brother's idolized wish. Would to God they might be the last who met

with such a miserable return!' (1985:156)

Later in the biography, equally self-consciously in tone, Gaskell provides a justification for inserting Monsieur Heger's letter to Patrick Brontë after the latter had lost his sister-in-law Elizabeth Branwell, who had also been his housekeeper and surrogate mother to his children. She describes it as 'a letter containing such a graceful appreciation of the daughters' characters, under the form of respect to their father, that I should have been tempted to copy it, even had there not also been a proposal made in it respecting Charlotte, which deserves a place in the record of her life'. Thus her justification for inserting a letter highly complimentary to her biographical subject is again a ploy to win her reader's sympathy, rather than risk alienating it by providing the rest of the controversial material relating to Monsieur Heger (which she omits), which would have revealed Charlotte's intense love for her professor of literature, a married man. It is fairly certain that Gaskell had sufficient information to have been able to guess at the extent of Charlotte's passion, yet revealing what would appear as a guilty attachment to the public would clearly not serve her purpose. Her omissions are thus also motivated by her desire to gain the public's sympathy for a clergyman's dutiful daughter.

Alan Shelston interprets her motivation as follows:

What is particularly interesting ... is the extent to which Mrs Gaskell allowed herself to be influenced on

matters of discretion by the way in which she wanted to portray her heroine. Where revelation might have conflicted with her shaping design she was reticent: where it confirmed it she relaxed.... the view of her friend which she came to hold with increasing firmness as she worked on the project was of an intensely sensitive figure who always sacrificed personal inclination to the higher call of duty.

(1977:58)

Where some of her contemporary readers felt Mrs Gaskell should be made the subject of legal action for what she exposed of Branwell's romantic attachment to Mrs Roberts and of Cowan Bridge school, later readers marvelled at her suppression of much of Charlotte's passionate correspondence with Monsieur Heger. Shelston's argument is that the image of Brontë which Gaskell wished to convey called for this selective discretion.

Mary Taylor's verdict of her and Elizabeth Gaskell's mutual friend is cited in the penultimate paragraph of the biography and is in this crucial position to promote the image Gaskell herself felt was true of Charlotte:

She thought much of her duty, and had loftier and clearer notions of it than most people, and held fast to them with more success. It was done, it seems to me, with much more difficulty than people have of stronger nerves, and better fortunes. All her life was but labour and pain; and she never threw down the burden for the sake of present pleasure.

(1985:526)

Perhaps she did not 'thr[o]w down the burden for the sake of present pleasure' but that she was sorely tempted to do so is evident from her passionate outbursts to Monsieur Heger. What these letters indicate is that Charlotte Brontë's self-denial at Haworth was often unwillingly achieved, and that her obsession with Heger was the expression of her sense, if only

in fantasy, of an alternative existence' (Shelston, 1977:60).

There is an interesting contrast in the attitudes Elizabeth Gaskell and Mary Taylor express towards Charlotte's reading public. After providing Gaskell with the comment cited above, Mary Taylor adds disparagingly:

I don't know what use you can make of all I have said. I have written it with the strong desire to obtain appreciation for her. Yet, what does it matter? She herself appealed to the world's judgment for her use of some of the faculties she had, - not the best, - but still the only ones she could turn to strangers' benefit. They heartily, greedily enjoyed the fruits of her labours, and then found out she was much to be blamed for possessing such faculties. Why ask for a judgment on her from such a world?

Gaskell ends her biography on a more conciliatory note, clearly believing that if treated in a complimentary fashion, the reading public may be expected to respond in kind:

But I turn [she writes in her final paragraph] from the critical, unsympathetic public, - inclined to judge harshly because they have only seen superficially and not thought deeply. I appeal to that larger and more solemn public, who know how to look with tender humility at faults and errors; how to admire generously extraordinary genius, and how to reverence with warm, full hearts all noble virtue. To that Public I commit the memory of Charlotte Brontë.

(1985:526)

Rather transparently, but not unskilfully, Gaskell as narrator attempts to steer her reader away from identifying with the 'critical unsympathetic public' to be associated instead with 'that larger and more solemn public'. True to form, she feels confident that her narrative would have stirred up the most sympathetic faculties of her reading public, and even suggests in explicit terms the appropriate response.

Gaskell's narration of Charlotte's life portrays a character committed to duty and self-denial. This is a true reflection *in part*. The other side of the picture is that Charlotte's passionate and independent nature resists containment. Lyndall Gordon explains the role of Charlotte's friend Mary in the writing of Gaskell's biography as follows:

Mary deliberately curtailed what she told Mrs Gaskell after Charlotte's death, aware that there were things that could not be said in the 1850s, things that would damage, further, her friend's reputation as unladylike rebel, things that would counter the model of duty.
(1994:54)

Some of these things were said by Charlotte herself, however, through the narration of *Jane Eyre*.

* * *

In both Gaskell's *Life* and Brontë's novel the narration is aimed at depicting a self with whom the reader can sympathize. Where Elizabeth Gaskell makes use of her power as narrator in her *Life of Charlotte Brontë* in a manner very sympathetic to her constructed subject, the narration in *Jane Eyre* reveals both similarities and differences to Gaskell's narration. The largely fictional nature of the material contributes to the greater freedom of the narrator. The first-person position of the narrator also has an impact on the propensity of the reader to identify with the main character.

In a valid comparison between fiction and ('factual') autobiography, Patricia Meyer Spacks refers to 'the multifarious and often surprising affinities that exist within the context of manifest difference', specifically with regard

to the construction of 'consistent identity':

Selfhood and consistent identity, whether by sheer illusion-making or through collaboration with experienced actuality, is the underlying obsession and final achievement of the literary imagination in both of these related genres. It provides the ground on which the complex relationship of subjective vision and verifiable truth enacts itself.

(1976:315)

Just as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* consists of a delicate balancing act between Gaskell's 'subjective vision and [the] verifiable truth' of Charlotte Brontë's 'life', so *Jane Eyre* is another example, in the context of fiction, of a narrator's attempt to convey a carefully constructed self, or the illusion thereof, to her readers. The power play in this novel contrasts with the very sympathetic way in which Elizabeth Gaskell makes use of her power as narrator in her *Life of Charlotte Brontë*.

As already pointed out, many contemporary critics judged the appropriacy of a book's subject matter, values, and style of presentation according to whether it was written by a man or a woman. Charlotte was particularly wounded by the way George Henry Lewes judged her as a woman rather than an author. Yet despite the ways in which women writers were inhibited, every narrator exercises a form of control over her material and is in some form of power relationship with regard to the characters in the world of fiction or, in the case of biography, of 'fact'. A very particular form of this relationship is found in autobiography, where the narrator's subject is herself. In the case of *Jane Eyre*, it is Jane Eyre

as narrator who is in the position to interpret the story she tells featuring herself as central character. At times she does so quite self-consciously as in the opening paragraph of Chapter 10:

Hitherto I have recorded in detail the events of my insignificant existence: to the first ten years of my life I have given almost as many chapters. But this is not to be a regular autobiography: I am only bound to invoke memory where I know her responses will possess some degree of interest; therefore I now pass a space of eight years almost in silence: a few lines only are necessary to keep up the links of connexion.

(1996:95)

She acknowledges a marked interest in her reader's 'responses' to the memories she invokes. As narrator she sets out to manipulate readers in favour of her own character as against her adversaries. In *Jane Eyre* there is a very marked relationship constructed between the internal narrator, Jane Eyre, and the implied reader.

Charlotte Brontë very deliberately chose as her heroine 'plain Jane', in the words of the inn-keeper 'a little, small thing, they say, almost like a child' (1984:405). A quotation from Charlotte Brontë's obituary written by Harriet Martineau makes clear her attitude:

'She once told her sisters that they were wrong - even morally wrong - in making their heroines beautiful as a matter of course. They replied that it was impossible to make a heroine interesting on any other terms. Her answer was, "I will prove to you that you are wrong; I will show you a heroine as plain and as small as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours. "Hence 'Jane Eyre,' said she in telling the anecdote: "but she is not myself, any further than that."'

(Gaskell, 1985:308)

Again, as with Anne's choice of Helen Graham as heroine in *The*

Tenant of Wildfell Hall, one could argue here that Charlotte has feminist reasons for her particular choice of heroine: small, plain and, initially, unloved. Her resistance to what could be construed as patriarchal demands on women to be physically appealing is evident as she challenges her sisters for conceding to stereotypical literary and societal expectations for women to be beautiful in the conventional sense.

It is noteworthy that Brontë stresses so emphatically that the aspect of self-identification extended no further than the physical appearance of the heroine. However, despite the disclaimer, the style of narration and the narrator's focus highlight psychological equivalents between Charlotte and Jane Eyre as well. The tension for women between a situation of dependence and an ambiguous need for independence was clearly felt by the author herself and is faced by Jane Eyre as heroine of the novel and also partially addressed by Jane Eyre as narrator. *Shirley* and *Villette* confront the issue even more directly.

In autobiography, be it 'factual' or fictional, the female character whose life is being presented can speak in her own voice even if she acknowledges that it is a male-dominated world. Shaping the material and formulating her point of view is her way of providing her perspective on a world which may marginalize her - or even, at times, threaten to dehumanize her. Such is the case with *Jane Eyre*. *The*

Professor - written from a male perspective - was patently unsuccessful. Thanks perhaps to Anne's boldness in allowing Agnes Grey to tell her own story, Charlotte was encouraged to move to the female first-person point of view in *Jane Eyre*.⁷ The effect of this strategy is that an orphan, poor, plain, unloved, comes to be in the crucial position of internal narrator, and is able to construct herself as heroine of her own tale. Her consciousness dominates the text.

The virtual annihilation of the hero in the later parts of the novel is handled in a powerful and paradoxical way. While Jane Eyre as heroine is in love with Rochester and destined to be his bride, Jane Eyre as narrator manipulates the text in such a way that Rochester is shown - through the eyes of Jane Eyre as focalizer - to be both dethroned and humiliated. He is dethroned as lord and master of Thornfield and also as potential bigamist. He has been humiliated by being blinded and crippled in his former wife's act of burning down his house, and attempting to murder her husband while also killing herself.⁸ There seems to me a sado-masochistic element in the way Jane Eyre as narrator tells her reader that Rochester is destroyed/disfigured and her simultaneous delight as character in surprising, consoling and finally marrying him. For the narrator there is some joy perhaps in telling the story of a domineering and deceitful male being humiliated. For the character, who has been in love with Rochester, there is the joy of reunion with the beloved.

From the earliest pages of the novel, Jane as narrator sets up a confidential relationship with the implied reader: an ideal confidante whose reactions are at times anticipated, whose objections are forestalled and whose sympathy is taken for granted. Chapter 11, for instance, in which Jane Eyre describes her arrival at Thornfield Hall where she is to take up employment as governess, begins as follows:

A new chapter in a novel is something like a new scene in a play; and when I draw up the curtain this time, reader, you must fancy you see a room ...

Reader, though I look comfortably accommodated, I am not very tranquil in my mind ...

It is a very strange sensation to inexperienced youth to feel itself quite alone in the world: cut adrift from every connection, uncertain whether the port to which it is bound can be reached, and prevented by many impediments from returning to that it has quitted.... fear with me became predominant when half an hour elapsed and still I was alone. I bethought myself to ring the bell.

(1996:106)

The movement into the present tense does indeed heighten the sense of dramatic immediacy as the character (turned actor) is presented by the narrator. The direct appellation of the reader is presumably meant to enhance our sympathy with the heroine, or to heighten our sense of identification.

Rochester's almost successful attempt to seduce Jane into a bigamous situation calls for revenge on the part of the narrator. Jane as character is of course in love with her 'master' and has to exercise a very strong effort of will to leave him. Her feelings are placed in submission to her will but in the process she almost loses her life through physical and emotional exertion. There is satisfaction in establishing

herself in a teaching career and gaining independence as an heiress. She is also sought after as a wife to her cousin St John Rivers, a missionary to India. It is from this position of power that she narrates her reunion with Rochester. There operates in the novel the dual perspective of Jane Eyre as narrator, in control of a woman's story, and of Jane Eyre as character, being reunited with the man she loves.

When the narrator towards the end of the novel tells of the sight of the blind Rochester uncertainly groping his way around Ferndean,⁹ she addresses her reader as follows: 'And, reader, do you think I feared him in his blind ferocity? - if you do, you little know me' (1996:460). When Jane refers to his walk as a blind man with 'Where was his daring stride now?' (1996:460), one detects a hint of mockery - if not exultation - in her voice. There appears to be a revelling in his powerlessness as she describes his uncertain movements:

he knew not which way to turn. He lifted his hand and opened his eyelids; gazed blank, and with a straining effort, on the sky, and toward the amphitheatre of trees: one saw that all to him was void darkness. He stretched his right hand (the left arm, the mutilated one, he kept hidden in his bosom)...

(1996:461)

When finally she reveals herself to him and they converse, the reader is informed, along with Jane Eyre as narratee: "On this arm, I have neither hand nor nails," he said, drawing the mutilated limb from his breast, and showing it to me. "It is a mere stump - a ghastly sight! Don't you think so, Jane?"

(1996:465) Jane is being placed in the position of evaluator

of the physical condition of her erstwhile employer and near-seducer. He is depicted as being utterly vulnerable and at her mercy. There is a total reversal of power relations in this novel and the former situation in which Jane was penniless and Rochester rich has changed dramatically:

I pressed my lips to his once brilliant and now rayless eyes - I swept his hair from his brow, and kissed that too. He suddenly seemed to arouse himself: the conviction of the reality of all this seized him.

'It is you - is it, Jane? You are come back to me, then?'

'I am.'

'And you do not lie dead in some ditch, under some stream? And you are not a pining outcast amongst strangers?'

'No, sir; I am an independent woman now.'

'Independent! What do you mean, Jane?'

'My uncle in Madeira is dead, and he left me five thousand pounds.'

'Ah! ... What, Janet! Are you an independent woman? A rich woman?'

'Quite rich, sir. If you won't let me live with you, I can build a house of my own close up to your door, and you may come and sit in my parlour when you want company of an evening.'

(1996:463-64)

The combination which is here displayed of a sense of power and simultaneous delight in subservience is unmistakable.¹⁰ The terms in which the marriage proposal between Rochester and Jane are presented clearly place her in the position of power:

'... Jane, will you marry me?'

'Yes, sir.'

'A poor blind man, whom you will have to lead about by the hand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'A crippled man, twenty years older than you, whom you will have to wait on?'

'Yes, sir.' ...

'... I love you better now, when I can really be useful to you, than I did in your state of proud independence, when you disdained every part but that of the giver and protector.'

Jane as giver feels more secure. She now is in the position of being needed, of being 'useful', of being depended upon. It is a situation she is more comfortable with, having come into her own in terms of social status both through her teaching career and through her inheritance.

The author-narrator-character triangle¹¹ takes on intriguing dimensions when one asks oneself what kind of pleasure the maker of the fiction took in telling Rochester's story. Why is Rochester made to suffer such a terrible fate? Is Charlotte Brontë taking vengeance on the male sex? Is Jane Eyre revelling in getting her own back on Rochester for attempting to trick her into becoming his mistress? Is the reader expected to find pleasure in the text of Rochester's demise? These are the questions the telling of the tale begs answers to.

The most famous sentence in *Jane Eyre* is probably the opening of Chapter 38: 'Reader, I married him.'¹² But whether this 'happy ending' answers the questions raised by the text remains dubious to me. Catherine Belsey in her *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (1994) prefers the unresolved ending of *Villette*,¹³ in which Lucy Snowe's financial and solitary independence are left intact by the probable drowning of her returning fiancé. Even the double wedding taking place at the end of *Shirley*, Brontë's third novel, is presented as being less satisfactory than the almost smug tone in which Jane Eyre describes her marriage to the blind Rochester. The

tone is one of blissful contentment and yet as reader one is only too aware of the power relations that have been rearranged and in terms of narration recently gloated over:

I have now been married ten years. I know what it is to live entirely for and with what [significantly not *whom*, as one would expect] I love best on earth. I hold myself supremely blest - blest beyond what language can express; because I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine. No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am: ever more absolutely bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh....

Mr. Rochester continued blind the first two years of our union ...

(1996:481)

Significantly, when Rochester does regain his eyesight it is not total restoration but in one eye only, enough to see when 'his first-born was put into his arms ... that the boy had inherited his own eyes, as they once were - large, brilliant, and black': 'On that occasion, he again, with a full heart, acknowledged that God had tempered judgment with mercy'

(1996:482). Rochester has become the submissive Christian.¹⁴

The reader recognizes in Jane's telling of Rochester's tale no more than the story of a just god wreaking vengeance on a man's attempt to abuse a woman. St John Rivers, too, Jane Eyre's cousin who pressurized her to enter into a loveless union in order to be a partner in his missionary endeavours in India, is promised imminent death in the closing chapter of the novel. In both the case of the once powerful Rochester and the forceful, handsome St John, it is found in this novel that the power ultimately lies not with them but with the female narrator in her telling of their tales.

Jane, however, eats her cake and has it too. The reader

is expected to rejoice with Jane in her happy marriage:

To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company. We talk, I believe, all day long: to talk to each other is but a more animated and an audible thinking. All my confidence is bestowed on him; all his confidence is devoted to me; we are precisely suited in character; perfect concord is the result.

(1996:481)

The 'consistent identity' to which Spacks refers seems here to be merging into Brontë's conception of an ideal union.

In *Jane Eyre*, therefore, a female character has been placed in control not only of her destiny¹⁵ but, perhaps even more significantly, of her account of it. This kind of empowering is made possible by using the autobiographical mode, or first-person narration. The act of narration (with the concomitant control over her material it gives the narrator) provides a very powerful means of self-realization to women who feel themselves confined by duty and societal expectations. In the form of *Jane Eyre*, a young woman character is provided a means of expression and consequently the opportunity to shape her own life-story.

Another aspect of *Jane Eyre* that is revealing in terms of constraints imposed upon women is the treatment of Bertha Mason, the so-called 'mad woman in the attic'. Gilbert and Gubar (whose title *Madwoman in the Attic* of course owes its origin to Brontë's Bertha Mason) regard *Jane Eyre* as a successful case of double-repression, where Jane's wilder, animal side comes to be projected increasingly upon Bertha. By the time of Bertha's death, Jane is ready to relinquish that

aspect of herself entirely and totally surrender (what is left of) herself to play for the rest of her life the part of Mrs Rochester, selfless and yet utterly in control. The question Gilbert and Gubar present is why Bertha Mason is repressed in *Jane Eyre*. Providing a survey of 'the spectral selves of Charlotte Brontë' and having intimated in their chapter entitled 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' that Jane Eyre fragments when contemplating becoming Jane Rochester, Gilbert and Gubar suggest that

on a figurative and psychological level it seems suspiciously clear that the specter of Bertha is still another - indeed the most threatening - avatar of Jane.... Bertha ... is Jane's truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead.

(1984:359-60)

This seems a somewhat simplistic reading of the functioning of two distinct characters - the one developing and maturing, the other already declined into bestiality. The commonality between Jane and Bertha lies in their defiance of Rochester, who is male, powerful, and wealthy. Where such defiance represents an aspect of Jane Eyre's heroism, its hazards are apparent in the fate of Bertha Mason.

The relegation of the madwoman in *Jane Eyre* to the attic places this novel firmly in the nineteenth century in contrast to the twentieth-century version, *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, where the so-called madwoman is treated with a great deal of sympathy, given her own voice and placed centre-stage as first-person narrator. According to Robert C. Young in his

Colonial Desire, '[i]t is striking that many novelists not only of today but also of the past write almost obsessively about the uncertain crossing and invasion of identities: whether of class and gender - the Brontës, Hardy or Lawrence - or culture and race - the Brontës again (the irresistible, transgressive Heathcliff is of mixed race), Haggard, Conrad..., James, Forster, Cary, Lawrence, Joyce, Greene, Rhys' (1995:2-3). In *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Jean Rhys's 'corrective' version of *Jane Eyre*, Jane is all but ignored. The accounts of Antoinette Mason (crudely renamed Bertha by her husband) and Edward Rochester himself¹⁶ are presented in interleaved, interlocked form as their first-person accounts alternate. The words of Dostoyevsky in J.M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* might apply to Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a reading of *Jane Eyre*: '... reading is being the arm and being the axe and being the skull; reading is giving yourself up, not holding yourself at a distance and jeering' (1994:47). Where the reader in *Jane Eyre* is invited to become Jane Eyre, who is both first-person narrator and central character in Brontë's novel, in Jean Rhys's novel the use of Rochester himself and Bertha Mason as alternating first-person narrators encourages identification with them. As first-person narrators they have more direct access to our sympathy than Jane Eyre, who is barely mentioned.

In the descriptions of Antoinette's sexual frenzies, Jean Rhys was, however, taking her cue from *Jane Eyre*. In the

latter novel, *Jane Eyre*, typically from a distance, describes what she sees as follows:

In the deep shade, at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not ... tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face.

(1996:314)

The distancing between the narrator and her subject in this passage is striking. She uses 'it' rather than 'she'; refuses to know whether she is regarding a 'beast or human being' and describes the hair she sees as 'grizzled' and 'mane'-like.

Where Gilbert and Gubar view Brontë's depiction of Bertha Mason as 'Jane's truest and darkest double', Jung's model of shadow selves is more applicable in my opinion to Jane's two suitors than to Bertha Mason. Edward Rochester is apparently unsuitable for Jane until the end of the novel, when he is weakened (indeed both blinded and crippled), significantly enough through the action of 'the madwoman in the attic', and St John Rivers is too ideal to need a flesh-and-blood wife. Indeed, marriage to Rivers represents a stifling of half of herself. As *Jane Eyre* herself puts it,

As for me, I daily wished more to please him; but to do so, I felt daily more and more that I must disown half my nature, stifle half my faculties, wrest my tastes from their original bent, force myself to the adoption of pursuits for which I had no natural vocation.

(1996:426)

This position contrasts with the fusion with Rochester which takes place later on in the novel in a context of joy for Jane

and dependence for Rochester.

Eagleton argues convincingly that both Rivers and Rochester '[image] aspects of Jane's fractured self which must not be denied': 'Both men are also attractive in a more subtle sense: each lives out a different kind of deadlock between passion and convention, suffering and affirmation, and so projects Jane's own predicament in more dramatic style' (1975:19). As a result of their partial - and only partial - and incomplete mirroring of Jane's inner needs and position, she can accept neither the offer to accompany Rivers to India, nor to be Rochester's mistress:

Rivers offers a social function which involves the sacrifice of personal fulfilment; Rochester's offer involves exactly the opposite. Both are inferior propositions to becoming Mrs Rochester, at once a fulfilling personal commitment and an enviable public role.

(1975:22)

St John is the idealist whose sense of perfection humiliates those he expects most from; Rochester the powerful one whose weakness and dependence makes it possible at last for him to have a true relationship with Jane.¹⁷

Part of the achievement of *Jane Eyre* is surely the way this 'extraordinarily contradictory amalgam' (Eagleton, 1975:16) is rationalized through the consistent use of internal narration, that is, the use of Jane Eyre's own voice. By means of this technique even what may seem to be contradictory impulses are held in balance, even if such balance is paradoxical:

She lives at that ambiguous point in the social structure at which two worlds - an interior one of emotional hungering, and an external one of harshly mechanical necessity - meet and collide....

Passion springs from the very core of the self and yet is hostile, alien, invasive; the world of internal fantasy must therefore be locked away, as the mad Mrs Rochester stays locked up on an upper floor of Thornfield, slipping out to infiltrate the 'real' world only in a few unaware moments of terrible destructiveness.

(Eagleton, 1975:16-17)

It is typical of Eagleton's Marxist perspective to attribute Jane's emotional attitudes to her social position, and of course the 'ambiguous point in the social structure' which she occupies does account for aspects of her dilemma. So too, though, does the co-existence in her of intense passion for Rochester and her spirit of fierce independence. Ultimately, Jane Eyre negotiates her way out of her dilemma on her own terms - thanks to the simultaneous humbling and freeing of Rochester by his former wife, and by her own gaining of financial independence by means of the inheritance bequeathed her by her uncle.¹⁸

Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre* is challenging the male definition of womanhood, through creating a 'small, plain' heroine using the pen to define herself. The text presents a powerless child developing into a powerful woman: from a position of authorial control, she describes her journey from voiceless rage in her aunt's house to articulate union with her beloved.

Both Charlotte Brontë and Jean Rhys seem predominantly concerned with finding a way through a hostile world for their

fragile female subject. Central to both novels is the (more or less successful) struggle of the protagonist to find her way through or around madness to fulfil her particular destiny. In the words of another woman writer who struggled to find her way through mental instability, in an essay called 'Street haunting', we read:

Is the true self this which stands at the pavement in January, or that which bends over the balcony in June? Am I here or am I there? Or is the true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are, indeed, ourselves.

(Virginia Woolf, 1967:161)

It seems to me that in the midst of the acknowledged evanescence and fragility of the self, never more clearly illustrated than when manifesting itself as insane, both Rhys and Brontë are in a sense considering the precarious route towards reconstituting the female subject. If the male ego could be regarded as requiring deconstruction, the female ego rather needs to be constructed.¹⁹ Both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* show the difficulties and obstacles involved in this process.

* * *

After the mixed reaction which Charlotte Brontë received from readers of *Jane Eyre*,²⁰ she attempted a move away from the stage of the personal love drama to the historic setting of *Shirley*. She chose to set it during 1811-12, a period of economic unrest and the Luddite riots, in order to grapple with political issues, to explore the 'condition of England'.

Although her motive is ostensibly to move from 'romance [to] reality', two personal love dramas are never far from centre stage for long. While Gilbert and Gubar view *Shirley* as an exploration of 'the distance between historical change and the seemingly unrelated, lonely struggles of her [Brontë's] heroines' (1984:373; my emphasis), my view is that Brontë's stated aim, that is, to present historical change, is in fact overshadowed by her more natural and usual focus - women's lives.

Each of Brontë's other three novels are written in the first person. *The Professor* somewhat unsuccessfully is presented from the rather ill-formed, patronizing perspective of Monsieur William Crimsworth. *Jane Eyre*'s point of view dominates the novel named after her and the most complex of the four, *Villette*, gives us the vantage point of Lucy Snowe, the central character. Charlotte Brontë was clearly somewhat out of her depth in this larger, historically ambitious enterprise in which the omniscient point of view is employed. *Shirley* has consequently attracted scathing criticism.²¹ The novel is described in the following (parenthetical) terms:

'(*Shirley* is an interminable, often boring novel, artificial in structure, stilted in manner; but as a treatment of the feminine situation, truly compelling)' (Spacks, 1976:75). It is because I largely agree with the latter part of this statement that I view *Shirley* primarily in terms of its contribution to the debate surrounding the woman question. My

interest is in Charlotte Brontë's choice of narrative strategies in fictionalizing elements of this debate.

Charlotte's novels show a progression as she responds to her reading public:

[*Shirley*] is above all a response to the public response to *Jane Eyre*.... The mystery of the author's sex and origin confused reviewers of *Jane Eyre* into revealing uncertain and questionable opinions about the relationship between gender, place, and fiction.
(Tim Dolin, 1995:198-201)

Just as Anne Brontë felt compelled to defend her right to express what she saw as the truth in the Preface to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, so the 'voice of the apologist' in *Shirley* is 'wholly comprehensible ... only in reference to the issue of female authorship': 'For Brontë's appeal to the truthfulness of her work is equally a defiance and rejection of the double chauvinism, against the femininity and provinciality prescribed by London...' (Dolin, 1995:204). As Charlotte herself wrote: 'Come what will, I cannot, when I write, think always of myself and of what is elegant and charming in femininity; it is not on those terms, or with such ideas, I ever took pen in hand ...' (cited in Gaskell, 1985:386).

What is of interest to us here is what emerges in *Shirley* of Charlotte Brontë's centre of concern. After all her careful research resulting in the impressively accurate portrayal of the state of Yorkshire in 1811-12 which one finds in the novel, she yet chooses as its title the name of a single woman, a character of her own creation. This seems to suggest,

as reinforced by her other novels, that it is after all the position of women, especially as regards the options open to single women, that is at the centre of her concern. With regard to the fictional status of Shirley who, with her wealth, independence and self-sufficiency encompasses maximum freedom of choice, Elizabeth Gaskell claims:

The character of Shirley herself is Charlotte's representation of Emily. I mention this, because all that I, a stranger, have been able to learn about her has not tended to give either me, or my readers, a pleasant impression of her. But we must remember how little we are acquainted with her, compared to that sister, who, out of her more intimate knowledge, says that she 'was genuinely good, and truly great,' and who tried to depict her character in Shirley Keeldar, as what Emily Brontë would have been, had she been placed in health and prosperity.
(1985:379)

Charlotte Brontë herself, however, makes no autobiographical commitment in her comments on the novel. In a letter to a friend she has the following to say of her heroines:

You are not to suppose any of the characters in 'Shirley' intended as literal portraits. It would not suit the rules of art, nor of my own feelings, to write in that style. We only suffer reality to *suggest*, never to *dictate*. The heroines are abstractions, and the heroes also. Qualities I have seen, loved, and admired, are here and there put in as decorative gems, to be preserved in that setting. Since you say you could recognise the originals of all except the heroines, pray whom did you suppose the two Moores to represent?
(Gaskell, 1985:388)

However imaginary the two heroines and the Moore brothers in *Shirley* may be if we take Charlotte Brontë's word to her friend, we need only refer to another of her own, possibly franker letters, to know that certainly many characters in the novel are based on real people lesser or more known to the

author. Although Brontë prefaces the following remarks with the comment, 'the book is far less founded on the Real, than perhaps appears', the evidence that many of her characters are fleshed out derivations from real-life originals is provided by Brontë herself in a letter to W.S. Williams:

As an instance how the characters have been managed, take that of Mr Helstone. If this character had an original, it was in the person of a clergyman who died some years since at the advanced age of eighty. I never saw him except once - at the consecration of a church - when I was a child of ten years old. I was then struck with his appearance, and stern, martial air. At a subsequent period, I heard him talked about in the neighbourhood where he resided: some mention him with enthusiasm - others with detestation. I listened to various anecdotes, balanced evidence against evidence and drew an inference. The original of Mr Hall I have seen; he knows me slightly; but he would as soon think I had closely observed him or taken him for a character - he would as soon, indeed, suspect me of writing a book - a novel - as he would his dog, Prince.

(Gaskell, 1985:382)

The inferences to be drawn from the last delightfully tongue-in-cheek sentence suggest the light in which women writers were regarded - or overlooked - by their contemporaries. As far as levels of fictionality are concerned, this passage also leaves us in no doubt that even if to create her heroines and heroes she builds characters from abstract qualities that she admires, her less important characters are indeed found scattered around her having been encountered in her daily life.

* * *

This section treats of the societal implications for women of marriage versus singleness. The tendency of society

to favour married women in terms of granting them status and respect - often at the expense of the unmarried - is implicitly challenged here, just as it is by Mr Knightley in his reprimand to Emma for her disrespectful treatment of Miss Bates in Jane Austen's novel.²²

Contrasting the narration of Chapters 10 and 11, 'Old Maids' and 'Fieldhead', will show not only how attractive Shirley is to the author, consequently lending her name to the title, but will also highlight the contrast between the two heroines, Caroline and Shirley. Shirley represents the appeal of the independent woman, independent financially and independent of spirit. Caroline in her longing to marry and in her timid personality represents the other side of the coin in an always ambivalent Brontë.

In 'Old Maids' the narrator presents Caroline wilting under the strain of the prospect of becoming one of that company, the company of 'old maids'. Although she is but a tender eighteen and a half (cf. 1985:212) at this stage, her sense of herself is no longer fresh, hopeful or youthful. Musing to herself, she surmises, 'half a century of existence may lie before me...':

'I shall not be married, it appears,' she continued. 'I suppose, as Robert does not care for me, I shall never have a husband to love, nor little children to take care of. Till lately I had reckoned securely on the duties and affections of wife and mother to occupy my existence. I considered, somehow, as a matter of course, that I was growing up to the ordinary destiny, and nevertroubled myself to seek any other; but now, I perceive plainly, I may have been mistaken. Probably I shall be an old maid. I shall live to see Robert married to some one else, some

rich lady: I shall never marry. What was I created for, I wonder? Where is my place in the world?'

In answer to the questions with which she closes the passage quoted above, Caroline dutifully sets herself the task of preparing for what she anticipates to be her own future, namely spinsterhood. She attempts a systematic study of the state as expressed in the lives of two women in the neighbourhood, Miss Mann and Miss Ainley. Before setting off to visit them, however, her true feelings emerge in conversation with her maid Fanny: 'I am certain old maids are a very unhappy race' (1985:192). Fanny equally candidly replies: 'Not they, Miss: they can't be unhappy; they take such care of themselves. They are all selfish.' But from such superficial judgments Caroline's living contact with her newfound friends rescues her.

The impression created of Miss Mann to start with is indeed one designed to make her appear intimidating to Caroline. At the same time, the narrator's tone is gently satirical as she hovers between sympathy and amusement at Miss Mann's efforts at attaining calmness:

She ... sat primly and somewhat grimly-tidy in a cushioned rocking-chair She scarcely rose as Caroline entered; to avoid excitement was one of Miss Mann's main aims in life: she had been composing herself ever since she came down in the morning, and had just attained a certain lethargic state of tranquillity when the visiter's [sic] knock at the door startled her, and undid her day's work. She was scarcely pleased, therefore, to see Miss Helstone: she received her with reserve, bade her be seated with austerity, and when she had got her placed opposite, she fixed her with her eye. (1985:193-4)

But it emerges that 'Miss Mann's goblin-grimness scarcely went deeper than the angel-sweetness of hundreds of beauties'

(1985:194). A bond of true sympathy between the two women is portrayed, and it is depicted as being much to the credit of Caroline: 'a sweet countenance is never so sweet as when the moved heart animates it with compassionate tenderness'

(1985:195). Such is the description of Caroline's face as she listens to her hostess. The narrator exhorts the reader in potent terms:

Reader! when you behold an aspect for whose constant gloom and frown you cannot account, whose unvarying cloud exasperates you by its apparent causelessness, be sure that there is a canker somewhere, and a canker not the less deeply corroding because concealed.

(1985:195)

The negative attitudes regarding spinsters expressed between Caroline and Fanny is transformed into one of warm admiration for the stoicism of Miss Mann and the saintliness of Miss Ainley. Of the latter, 'Mr Hall, the vicar of Nunnely said, and said truly, that her life came nearer the life of Christ, than that of any other human being he had ever met with'. Again, the narrator very directly and apparently frankly addresses the reader, affirming the rootedness of at least certain of her characters in life itself: 'You must not think, reader, that in sketching Miss Ainley's character, I depict a figment of imagination - no - we seek the originals of such portraits in real life only' (1985:198). Such narrative interventions, common in Brontë's novels, suggest the depth of her commitment to changing the attitude of

society towards the plight of single women. This I regard as a major thrust in all four her novels.

There is a refreshing change of tone with the introduction of the buoyant 'Captain Keeldar' in Chapter 11, which bears the title of this her new abode, 'Fieldhead'. Caroline is shy and reluctant even to accompany her uncle on a visit to Shirley Keeldar. Before the reader is introduced to Shirley, she is described in the uncharacteristically tantalizing words of the misogynistic Mr Helstone: '... She holds her head high, and probably can be saucy enough where she dare, - she wouldn't be a woman otherwise' (1985:207-08). This description of Shirley as proud, vigorous and confident presents a marked contrast to the narrator's depiction of Caroline as a pale, wilting flower. The option of singleness for Caroline remains daunting and unappealing. It is Shirley who is shown to be able to enjoy being 'a man among men', as it were.

The physical comparison between the two heroines is made in the following passage: '...Shirley Keeldar was no ugly heiress: she was agreeable to the eye. Her height and shape were not unlike Miss Helstone's: perhaps in stature she might have the advantage by an inch or two; she was gracefully made...' (1985:211-12). In spirit, the difference between them emerges clearly in the following telling short paragraph depicting Shirley's interaction with Caroline's uncle: 'Mischievous, spirit, and glee sparkled all over her face as she

thus bandied words with the old Cossack, who almost equally enjoyed the tilt' (1985:215). Shirley's independence, poise, positive self-image and social confidence are frequently juxtaposed with Caroline's more withdrawn nature.

The way Shirley confides to her new friend her grave reservations about men and the state of marriage suggests how seriously she considers the option to remain single a viable one:

'... But, to tell you a secret, if I were convinced that they [men] are necessarily and universally different from us - fickle, soon petrifying, unsympathizing - I would never marry. I should not like to find out that what I loved did not love me, that it was weary of me, and that whatever effort I might make to please would hereafter be worse than useless, since it was inevitably in its nature to change and become indifferent. That discovery once made, what should I long for? To go away - to remove from a presence where my society gave no pleasure.'

'But you could not, if you were married.'

'No, I could not, - there it is. I could never be my own mistress more. A terrible thought! - it suffocates me! Nothing irks me like the idea of being a burden and a bore, - an inevitable burden, - a ceaseless bore! Now, when I feel my company superfluous, I can comfortably fold my independence round me like a mantle, and drop my pride like a veil, and withdraw to solitude. If married, that could not be.

(1985:223-24)

It is the great zest for and appreciation of being her 'own mistress', of her mantle-like independence, which Shirley embraces here that anticipates the dragging of her feet, the strange prolonging of her betrothal to Louis Moore at the end of the novel.

In the course of their friendship, Caroline and Shirley focus their conversation on the different positions of men and women. The direct speech of the characters is perhaps even

more potent than any narrative intervention on the part of the omniscient teller of the tale could have been:

'Shirley, men and women are so different: they are in such a different position. Women have so few things to think about - men so many: you may have a friendship for a man, while he is almost indifferent to you. Much of what cheers your life may be dependent on him, while not a feeling or interest of moment in his eyes may have reference to you....'

'Caroline,' demanded Miss Keeldar, abruptly, 'don't you wish you had a profession - a trade?'

(1985:234-35)

The use of the verb 'demanded' and the adverb 'abruptly' suggests that the question itself is indicative of frustration on Shirley's part. The intensity of Caroline's response cited below to Shirley's frank question is disturbing:

'I wish it fifty times a-day. As it is, I often wonder what I came into the world for. I long to have something absorbing and compulsory to fill my head and hands, and to occupy my thoughts.'

(1985:235)

Caroline's *cri de coeur* could well imply Charlotte Brontë's own felt need for a different social dispensation regarding employment for women, providing but one instance among many in the novel of an articulation of the need for greater opportunity for self-fulfilment in the lives of women.

To Shirley's questions whether 'labour alone [could] make a human being happy' and whether 'hard labour and learned professions ... make women masculine, coarse, unwomanly', Caroline's response reveals how her identification with Misses Ainley and Mann has made her view their single state so very much more sympathetically, although certainly without making her more desirous of joining their ranks. This is made clear

in the latter part of the quotation:

'And what does it signify, whether unmarried and never-to-be-married women are unattractive and inelegant, or not? - provided only they are decent, decorous, and neat, it is enough. The utmost which ought to be required of old maids, in the way of appearance, is that they should not absolutely offend men's eyes as they pass them in the street; for the rest, they should be allowed, without too much scorn, to be as absorbed, grave, plain-looking, and plain-dressed as they please.'

(1985:235)

There is an element of poignancy in this evocation of the lack of concern for their physical appearance on the part of single women, which suggests a repressed yearning for physical affirmation from a male source. Brontë is making it clear that women frequently define themselves only in terms of how they impress men, especially when it comes to their physical appearance.

One of the major themes of the novel hinges on the comparative blessings and burdens of marriage versus singleness. What strikes one forcibly is the passivity of women in their choice of lot. They are seen only to respond positively (in the case of a Moore) or negatively (in the case of 'a Malone or a Sykes') to whichever man may come along with the desire to marry them:

'You might be an old maid yourself, Caroline, you speak so earnestly.'

'I shall be one: it is my destiny. I will never marry a Malone or a Sykes - and no one else will ever marry me.'

(1985:235)

What is important about Shirley and Caroline in comparative terms is the way in which Shirley views herself as so much more in charge of her own fate than Caroline.²³ Caroline sees

herself as not much more than a passive recipient of what life has to offer, capable actively of at most 'no' to 'a Malone or a Sykes', a rather 'negative capability', and not in an entirely Keatsian sense either.²⁴

In their own relationship, there is a charming and winning humility on the part of the older,²⁵ wealthier, more confident Shirley towards her diffident young friend. Caroline is forthright and assertive enough in the expression of her views in dialogue with Shirley. But it is clear, nevertheless, that in relation to life Shirley is the one who is 'in charge' even though in relation to each other it is an admirably mutual friendship that Charlotte Brontë depicts. Gilbert and Gubar present their view of Charlotte Brontë's pair of heroines, specifically in relation to Robert Moore, as follows:

That Shirley is Caroline's double, a projection of all her repressed desire, becomes apparent in the acts she performs 'for' Caroline. What Shirley does is what Caroline would like to do:... Caroline wants to lighten Robert's financial burden and Shirley secures him a loan; Caroline tries to repress her desire for Robert, while Shirley gains his attention and proposal of marriage; Caroline has always known that he needs to be taught a lesson ... and Shirley gives it to him in the form of a humiliating rejection of his marriage proposal.

(1984:383)

The above quotation accurately highlights that Shirley in some ways achieves the fulfilment of Caroline's desires with regard to Robert. However, as with their analysis of Bertha Mason as Jane's double, so Gilbert and Gubar's analysis here undermines the complexity of the individual characterization of the two

central women characters in this novel. While their personalities are presented as strikingly different, what they have in common is what is emphasized in the text: an appreciation of the limitations of women's social and economic position, particularly as regards choice of occupation and marriage partner.

Despite all Caroline's investment in the single life, when finally all confusion is ironed out, the novel appears to offer a conventionally happy ending. Through all the *Midsummer Night's Dream*-type permutations of the plot, Caroline and Shirley's friendship finally blossoms into the double wedding which makes them sisters-in-law. Yet there is unease just beneath the surface. The prime example of this unease lies in the (perhaps deliberately) exaggerated depiction of Shirley's eventual submission to her former tutor, the quiet Louis Moore. From being generally imperious she changes to complete deference: 'She abdicated without a word or a struggle. "Go to Mr Moore; ask Mr Moore," was her answer when applied to for orders' (1985:592). Although Louis Moore refers to Shirley as a leopardess, he claims that '[t]ame or fierce, wild or subdued, you are mine'. To this Shirley responds: 'I am glad I know my keeper only his hand shall manage me; only at his feet will I repose' (1985:579). This hardly seems in keeping with the character who expressed earlier on such vital appreciation of her mantle-like independence.²⁶

What, then, can be said in conclusion about Charlotte

Brontë's attitude to women in her society? Clearly, she saw them as marginalized through lack of power and recognition. Even when they do possess a type of power (wealth, as in Shirley's case, or courage), it is often not recognized, and this partly through their own submission to societal pressure.²⁷

Thus, while women's alternatives have been questioned throughout the novel, the conventional ending is nevertheless provided. *Shirley* ends with marriage for Caroline. She was clearly longing for it throughout: the prospect of becoming an 'old maid' sent her into a serious physical and emotional decline. The ambiguity of the ending seems to lie in marriage for Shirley - the independent figure who appeared able to hold her own among men in all sorts of ways. There is a lameness, a triteness and, perhaps most disturbingly of all, a *distancing* from the heroines right at the end of the novel which suggests that the tone of the narrator is less than convinced.

Charlotte Brontë's own attitude therefore seems ambivalent. She does not seem to be nearly as clear as Anne about what precisely she is attempting to communicate. Woman's passion, woman's plight, woman's position, above all, woman's *ambivalence* with regard to men, are presented by Charlotte. She recognizes the marginalization of women, yet seems hesitant to present her heroines as challenging the situation too directly. While exposing some of the realities and tactics involved in keeping women down, she presents her heroines as

finally submitting and yielding to those very pressures which one senses she longs to have removed. In the case of Elizabeth Gaskell, her sympathetic account of 'the life of Charlotte Brontë' gives her the opportunity to reveal in her own way the constraints operating on a woman writer of fiction in their day.

ENDNOTES

1. This link will be made particularly in terms of how they view themselves as expressed in correspondence.
2. This point has been raised and addressed in Chapter Two, on pp. 80-82 above, and particularly by Anne Brontë in her Preface to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (see Appendix on pp. 287-90 below).
3. While it is true that the death of her son galvanised her into the writing of *Mary Barton*, her fourth daughter's birth in 1846 did not stop Gaskell; instead, 'the mother wrote faster than ever' (Uglow, 1993:155).
4. According to D'Albertis, 'Gaskell lies for, to, and about her "Self"' (1997:178).
5. Mrs Roberts did in fact file a lawsuit against her.
6. Gordon, for instance, writes:

Charlotte replied with apparent propriety which completely reassured Southey, but her letter reverberates with veiled sarcasm. The brilliant verbal glide of her abjection to Southey was her first public performance of a role she was to make her own: hiding undaunted creative fire under the public mask of perfect docility.
(1994:65)
7. This contention is made and substantiated by Langland in 1989.
8. It is made to appear that Rochester tried to save his suicidal wife after she set fire to Thornfield.
9. This is the property to which he moved after the burning down of Thornfield by his suicidal wife.
10. Charlotte's ambivalence is also recognized and explored by Jacobs in a contrast between Charlotte and her sisters Emily and Anne (see epigraph to Chapter Two on p. 75 above).
11. This is a concept to which Lanser refers in *The Narrative Act* (1981).
12. Patricia Beer has named an entire critical work *Reader, I Married Him* (1974). On the other hand, Elsie Harrison writes: 'there can be no more inadequate phrase, after all Charlotte had written of the whirlwind of bleak emotion, than [this] famous banality...' (1948:161).
13. Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) more than compensates for the sentimental epilogue to *Jane Eyre* by withholding

closure altogether. Unsure whether M. Paul returns to claim his bride, the reader is left to ponder whether the conventional romantic conclusion would be worth the inevitable sacrifice of Lucy's hard-won independence. (Belsey, 1994:119)

14. One is reminded here of Helen Huntingdon nursing her dying husband and - despite her espousal of Universalism - almost revelling in the after-life experience she envisages for him. This is discussed in some detail towards the end of my previous chapter.

15. This occurred by means of her inheriting a small fortune.

16. Both are in a sense - through direct or indirect parental pressure - betrayed into a lustful, loveless marriage.

17. According to Eagleton, '[w]here Charlotte Brontë differs most from Emily is precisely in this impulse to negotiate passionate self-fulfilment on terms which preserve the social and moral conventions intact, and so preserve intact the submissive, enduring, everyday self which adheres to them':

Her protagonists are an extraordinarily contradictory amalgam of smouldering rebelliousness and prim conventionalism, gushing Romantic fantasy and canny hard-headedness, quivering sensitivity and blunt rationality.

(1975:16)

18. The reader indeed has a déjà-vu feeling at the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea* when 'Antoinette acts out *Jane Eyre's* conclusion and recognizes herself as the so-called ghost in Thornfield Hall' (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 1985:250):

I went into the hall again with the tall candle in my hand. It was then that I saw her - the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her ... Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do.

(Rhys, 1966:154)

Spivak provides an intertextual reading of the ending of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the following terms:

We can read this as her having been brought in to the England of Brontë's novel: 'This cardboard house' - a book between cardboard covers - 'where I walk at night is not England' In this fictive England, she must play out her role, act out the transformation of her 'self' into that fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that *Jane Eyre* can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction.

(1985:250-251)

In *Wide Sargasso Sea* Antoinette Mason's decision to set the house alight is a kind of duty - performed in a trance-like state. She is obeying the laws of her unconscious. Ultimately, unknowingly (as Jane scarcely features in her world), she is making a way for the power balance between Jane and Rochester to be restored - readers of *Jane Eyre* know that Jane now becomes dominant while Rochester is dependent, crippled and blind.

Spivak comments: 'Rhys makes Antoinette see her *self* as her Other, Brontë's Bertha' (1985:250). Antoinette reaps the destructive effects of self-alienation. Throughout *Wide Sargasso Sea* there is in fact an interesting juxtaposition between the male gaze and female self-perception. Neither Antoinette nor Jane in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is seen to find a wholesome route to self-fulfilment. Towards the end of the novel and shortly before she burns the house down - in response to a symbolic and recurring dream - there is the recollection of a mirror scene where Antoinette is seen to be grappling with a sense of lost identity:

There is no looking-glass here and I don't know what I am like now. I remember watching myself brush my hair and how my eyes looked back at me. The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself. Long ago when I was a child and very lonely I tried to kiss her. But the glass was between us - hard, cold and misted over with my breath. Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I?

(1966:180)

According to Carol Davison, 'madness may be described as the most potentially subversive subject in women's fiction, for the reassessment of female insanity necessitates its corollary - the reappraisal of patriarchal sanity' (1990:19). In Rhys, the juxtaposition of Rochester's and Antoinette's perspectives implicitly reinforces this effect.

19. Patricia Waugh makes and explores this point extensively in her *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (1989).

20. The most scathing was Elizabeth Rigby's review in the *Quarterly Review* of December 1848.

21. In their Introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, on the other hand, Andrew and Judith Hook (1974) argue that if *Shirley* is compared with the 'condition of England' novels instead of being condemned for not fulfilling 'the expectations created by *Jane Eyre* and sustained by *Villette* *Shirley* suddenly takes its proper place. ... [It] becomes an immensely richer and more satisfying novel' (1985:9).

22. After Emma has mocked Miss Bates's garrulity in public, Mr Knightley reprimands her as follows:

'Emma, I must once more speak to you as I have been used to do: a privilege rather endured than allowed, perhaps, but I must still use it. I cannot see you acting wrong, without a remonstrance. How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates? How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age, and situation? ...'

'... Were she a woman of fortune, I would leave every harmless absurdity to take its chance, I would not quarrel with you for any liberties of manner. Were she your equal in situation - but, Emma, consider how far this is from being the case. She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done, indeed! ...'

(1984:367-68)

23. In their social relations, it is enough to look at Helstone's interaction with Shirley to notice the remarkable extent of her social poise and expertise. It is useful at this point to remind ourselves of how later she will throw Malone off her property as an expression of her revulsion at what he represents: a more forceful, direct and explicit way of saying 'no' than Caroline could ever muster. Perhaps we have enough pointers by now to why Brontë named the novel after Shirley.

24. Keats used the term 'negative capability' to mean 'no irritable reaching after fact or reason' in a letter to his brothers written on 21 December 1817 (Allott, ed., 1970:xx).

25. Shirley is twenty-one and Caroline eighteen-and-a-half.

26. The relevant extract is cited on p. 162 above.

27. When Shirley and Caroline brave a dangerous night-time venture during the riot at Robert Moore's mill, they keep it secret: 'something terrible, a still-renewing tumult, was obvious; fierce attacks, desperate repulses; the mill-yard, the mill itself, was full of battle-movement...' (1985:336). Are they rewarded for their bravery? It is none other than Shirley who prevents the more emotional Caroline from making her presence known to her beloved Robert by warning her not 'to make a spectacle of [her]self and him before those soldiers, Mr Malone, [her] uncle, et cetera' (1985:338). Finally, they resolve to '... steal in as we stole out: none shall know where we have been, or what we have seen to-night: neither taunt nor misconstruction can consequently molest us' (1985:340).

CHAPTER FOUR

Villette, the Feminists' Favourite

Only in novels did [Charlotte] emerge fully; there, alone, did she call up men adventurous enough to give assent to the woman to be.

What such a woman was to be remained in the making, as her energy and passion surged forward, inexorably, through Charlotte Brontë's works. What is the nature of women? This is the overwhelming question she left behind, and any answer remains, as yet, uncertain...

(Gordon, 1994:341)

An exploration of internal narration in *Villette* reveals that Brontë is telling a religious story in a feminist way. First-person narration is seen to be employed as strategy in the sense that the narrator, who is also the central character, is in a position to control the narrative and bring to the reader's attention aspects of woman's lot not commonly recognized as of heroic import. The foregrounding of the central character as *narrator* focuses the attention of the reader on Lucy Snowe both as woman writer (that is, as teller of her own tale) and as central female character.

As with *Jane Eyre*, Lucy Snowe's self-definition is made complex and intriguing by the juxtaposition between her initially powerless status as character and the position of control she occupies in her capacity as narrator. Unlike Charlotte Brontë's treatment of *Jane Eyre*, though, there is a very significant emphasis on Lucy's religious self, a self that is defined in terms of the Protestant position of independence, individuality and free choice as against the Catholic position of submission to papal and ecclesiastical authority. The Protestant-Catholic debate in the novel

centralizes the importance to Lucy Snowe of her individual faith, and thus provides a way to explore religion as it impacts on identity as well as on narrative construction. This is particularly to be seen in the resolution for Lucy of the Protestant-Catholic tension between herself and Emanuel, and in the ambiguous ending of the novel.

As already suggested in the previous chapters, Charlotte Brontë's novels reveal far greater ambivalence regarding women's position in society than either the novels of Jane Austen or of Charlotte's sisters Anne and Emily. While these authors show themselves aware of the complex situations and predicaments in which women frequently find themselves with regard to the pressures they face concerning marriage, for instance, they seem more in control of their particular approach to the subject than Charlotte. Part of the dilemma for the female characters in Charlotte Brontë is the nature of their at times contradictory desires for independence and fusion. Negotiating her way through her life's events and telling her tale with particular emphases enable Lucy Snowe as character and as narrator to pick her way through contradictory desires and finally to realize both her dreams. Her early emphasis on Graham Bretton and her later focus on Emanuel make possible ways of telling which highlight contradictions in her desires. In a review which was to cause a rift between herself and Charlotte, Harriet Martineau complained of *Villette* that 'the heroine, who tells her own

story, leaves the reader at last under the uncomfortable impression of her having either entertained a double love, or allowed one to supersede another without notification of the transition' (*Daily News*, 3 February 1853:2).¹ Her Protestant allegiance with its emphasis on independence triumphs over her attraction to Catholicism. Her desire for fusion with a man has finally to yield to the solitary life. But the temporary experience of union opens the way to greater confidence and deeper fulfilment.

One is dealing in this novel perhaps more than the others with the rather messy terrain where clear boundaries between author, narrator and character crumble. What prevents disintegration and holds all the threads together is the autobiographical form of the novel. The highly complex narrative strategies used in this novel reveal subtle forms of manipulation and control. Lucy Snowe, the first-person narrator, a very intricate character, claims to be far less articulate in her speech than in her writing.² It is almost a coquettish form of irony with which she engages the reader in the opening paragraph of Chapter 2: 'I, Lucy Snowe, plead guiltless of that curse, an overheated and discursive imagination' (1985:69). To the unsuspecting reader this may at first seem to be an accurate description, and to be accompanied by a stance almost emotionless, because so severely detached. As the novel progresses, however, one discovers that beneath her dry exterior, Lucy Snowe as

character contains a passionate nature. This is hinted at in the very next paragraph when she describes Pauline:

And again, when of moonlight nights, on waking, I beheld her figure, white and conspicuous in its night-dress, kneeling upright in bed, and praying like some Catholic or Methodist enthusiast - some precocious fanatic or untimely saint - I scarcely know what thoughts I had; but they ran risk of being hardly more rational and healthy than that child's mind must have been.

(1985:69)

Here also is an example of the eliding of boundaries between character and narrator. Again, there is a provocative exchange with the reader when the narrator hints at irrationality which she claims defies self-understanding let alone communication. What emerges here, as it does throughout the novel, particularly in the early part, is the tension between Lucy as narrator and Lucy as character. Lucy as narrator ostensibly tries to depict a passionless exterior and keep a detached, neutral stance, while Lucy as character is anything but passionless.

On a typically dry and unsentimental note, for instance, Lucy Snowe begins the fifth chapter of her narrative, 'Turning a New Leaf', as follows:

My mistress being dead, and I once more alone, I had to look out for a new place. About this time I might be a little - a very little, shaken in nerves. I grant I was not looking well, but on the contrary, thin, haggard, and hollow eyed; like a sitter-up at night, like an over-wrought servant, or a placeless person in debt.

Typically, at this stage of her narrative, the images Lucy uses in self-depiction are negative, 'a placeless person in debt' indicates both a lack of belonging and a lack of

resources. There is also a tentative reference to her 'nervous condition' - 'I might be a little - a very little, shaken in nerves' (1985:103).

The link between Lucy's 'nervous condition' and the act of narration deserves exploration. While Belsey argues that women often get 'sick' in order to retreat from discourse,³ Athena Vrettos more controversially suggests that Lucy's nervous condition is necessary for the act of narration. Citing the (much later) instance of Lucy's empathy with the king at the concert she attends, Vrettos deduces:

The correlation between narration and neurosis in *Villette* is integral to Brontë's view of her narrator/heroine. She explicitly links the symptoms of Lucy's illness to her narrative role.... What Brontë indicates ... is that far from being an aberration of character, Lucy's nervous disease constitutes the fabric of her narrative consciousness.... Nervous sensibility ... translates into narrative perspicacity. Throughout *Villette*, the fixity of Lucy's narrative gaze marks unique moments of spiritual sympathy that set her apart from those with ordinary sensibilities and project her into their lives with an uncanny power to interpret the drama within.... Lucy finds that the subtlety of her perceptions is inseparable from the condition of her nerves.

(1990:567)

Vrettos bases her entire argument on what she regards as the already well established 'fictive connection between illness and sensibility' and tends to overemphasize the significance of Lucy's 'nervous condition' as a prerequisite for narration:

Brontë's expansion of the genre constituted a significant departure from traditional depictions of the nerves, linking nervous sensibility to an emerging psychological realism and making illness a condition of narrative authority rather than an expression of sentimental distress.

(1990:561)

This latter claim seems to me to be an exaggerated one. Lucy narrates despite her nervous condition and about it; it may heighten her sensitivity at times; but to claim it as 'a condition of narrative authority' seems to me to be more than the novel implies. Instead, Lucy suggests that expediency dictated the adoption of a 'stoical' pose:

Oh, my childhood! I had feelings: passive as I lived, little as I spoke, cold as I looked, when I thought of past days, I *could* feel. About the present, it was better to be stoical: about the future - such a future as mine - to be dead. And in catalepsy and a dead trance, I studiously held the quick of my nature.

(1991:175)

Here Lucy highlights the contrast between what she reveals to the world - 'catalepsy and a dead trance' - as opposed to what she enables the reader to perceive. At this juncture, even turbulent weather would be dreaded by Lucy as it 'woke the being [she] was always lulling, and stirred up a craving cry [she] could not satisfy' (1991:175-76). This 'inner woman' needing an outlet for her intense emotions, and seeking a haven that she herself could not provide, is exposed to the reader alone. Despite the image she projects to those around her, in her capacity as narrator Lucy reveals herself to her reader as capable of experiencing great intensity of emotion.

On another occasion,⁴ Lucy describes her experience of a quick succession of mixed emotions:

The spectacle of a suspicious nature [Madame Beck's] so far misled by its own inventions, tickled me much. Yet as the laugh died, a kind of wrath smote me, and then bitterness followed: it was the rock struck, and Meribah's waters gushing out. I never had felt so strange and contradictory an inward tumult as I felt for an hour

that evening: soreness and laughter, and fire, and grief, shared my heart between them. I cried hot tears; not because madame mistrusted me - I did not care twopence for her mistrust - but for other reasons. Complicated, disquieting thoughts broke up the whole repose of my nature. However, that turmoil subsided: next day I was again Lucy Snowe.

(1985:186-87)

The contrast she here implicitly sets up between 'turmoil' and the persona 'Lucy Snowe' is revealing. She uses her narrative to distance herself from her inner 'contradictory ... tumult'. Whatever she may have felt, as narrator she offers the reader the image of herself seen by her fellow pupils and teachers - that of herself as cool, detached, in charge. But of course the reader also has available descriptions of her inner 'fire, and grief'. It is in this way that the narrator is preparing the reader for the depth of response the character Lucy will have to a passionate man like Emanuel. The point here is that there is clearly a marked tension between what Lucy as character reveals to the outside world and what Lucy as narrator allows her reader to know. As in *Jane Eyre*, a distinctive and confidential relationship is set up between narrator and implied reader - only here, in *Villette*, the relationship is even more complex. The importance to women of the way they are perceived by others and the tension between this concern and the inner tumult they may be experiencing are evident in these passages.

Lucy Snowe as character starts off very repressed. Her theatrical performance, the attention she receives from Emanuel, her growing confidence in herself as English

Protestant rather than Belgian Catholic all lead to greater freedom and self-expression than she exhibits in the opening chapters. Lucy as narrator develops a relationship of erratic intimacy with the reader.

Her relationship to herself at this stage of the narrative is somewhat ambiguous, as is demonstrated by the following self-description:

For a long time the fear of seeming singular scared me away [from taking a walk in a verdurous alley]; but by degrees, as people became accustomed to me and my habits, and to such shades of peculiarity as were engrained in my nature - shades, certainly not striking enough to interest, and perhaps not prominent enough to offend, but born in and with me, and no more to be parted with than my identity - by slow degrees I became a frequenter of this strait and narrow path.

(1985:174)

There is a merging here between her own perspective and the view of her she attributes to the Labassecouriens. Are these 'shades of peculiarity', which she claims are 'engrained in [her] nature', an aspect of her individuality which characterizes her as a British woman? One is concerned here both with gender and nationality. It seems to me that Lucy - in distinguishing herself very clearly from the mass of Labassecourien girls⁵ - is making a point about her distinctiveness as an individual, specifically an English woman (that is, a foreigner in *Villette*).

When the *billet doux* intended for Rosalie lands accidentally in Lucy's hand she reads about herself in the following unflattering terms, which she then retains in French for the reader. Again, this not only reinforces the bond of

intellectual intimacy Lucy Snowe as narrator has attempted to build between herself and the reader. Her refusal to translate the insult has the effect of distancing it from her specifically English persona. The quotation from the letter (to which Lucy adds her own comment in parenthesis) is cited below. It is clearly phrased deliberately to provoke her:

... the alley so strictly secluded - often, you said, haunted by that dragon, the English teacher - une véritable begueule Britannique à ce que vous dites - espece de monstre, brusque et rude comme un vieux caporal de grenadiers, et reveche comme une religieuse (the reader will excuse my modesty in allowing this flattering sketch of my amiable self to retain the slight veil of the original tongue.)

(1985:178)

Even the irony implicit in the phrase 'my amiable self' relies on an earlier understanding between narrator and reader, and on the assumption that the reader's assessment of Lucy will be different from Alfred de Hamal's. To the Alfred de Hamals of this world, who are frivolous, conceited, and dishonourable, Lucy Snowe has nothing to recommend herself. One of the implications here is that it takes altogether superior men to appreciate the uniqueness of Lucy Snowe. Such would be the medically qualified and more wholesome Graham Bretton or the more experienced Paul Emanuel, who has himself suffered disappointment and grief, and is therefore less easily impressed by frivolity. What is also noteworthy here for my purposes is the half-ironic, half-coquettish and consistently confiding tone Lucy uses in relation to the reader. Throughout the novel there is an assumption of superiority based on her

Britishness as well as on her Protestantism which Lucy assumes the reader shares.

Lucy as narrator gives the reader insight into her motivation as writer. A conscious choice is implied. Lucy describes the two contrasting writing styles she uses to respond to Bretton's letters:

To begin with: Feeling and I turned Reason out of doors, drew against her bar and bolt, then we sat down, spread our paper, dipped in the ink an eager pen, and, with deep enjoyment, poured out our sincere heart. When we had done - when two sheets were covered with the language of a strongly-adherent affection, a rooted and active gratitude - ... when, then, I had given expression to a closely-clinging and deeply-honouring attachment - an attachment that wanted to attract to itself and take into its own lot all that was painful in the destiny of its object; that would, if it could, have absorbed and conducted away all storms and lightnings from an existence viewed with a passion of solicitude - then, just at that moment, the doors of my heart would shake, bolt and bar would yield, Reason would leap in, vigorous and revengeful, snatch the full sheets, read, sneer, erase, tear up, re-write, fold seal, direct, and send a terse, curt missive of a page. She did right.

(1985:335)

Lucy in other words views Feeling and Reason as conflicting impulses vying with each other to control her writing - at least to Bretton. In her autobiographical utterances to the reader she is able to allow herself greater freedom and feels less need to censor herself. She is free of the constraints of modesty and reserve required by the dynamics of male-female relationships of the day.⁶

In her self-presentation to the reader, Lucy Snowe frequently uses images of herself as narrator. One such instance is her famous self-reflexive statement, 'I must not,

from the faithful narrator, degenerate into the partial eulogist' (1985:272). Paul Emanuel, on the other hand, describes himself as a reader. When describing his activity of spying (certainly that is how it appears to Lucy) on the female inhabitants of the Rue de Fossette, he says: `... My book is this garden; its contents are human nature. I know you all by heart' (1985:453). Lucy, on the other hand, regards Emanuel himself as her reading resource: `his mind was indeed my library, and whenever it was opened to me, I entered bliss' (1985:472). There is also a hint as to the potential their relationship holds in terms of his inspired speech and her writing/recording ability:

M. Emanuel was not a man to write books; but I have heard him lavish, with careless, unconscious prodigality, such mental wealth as books seldom boast ... I used to think what a delight it would be for one who loved him better than he loved himself, to gather and store up those handfuls of gold-dust, so recklessly flung to heaven's reckless winds.

(1985:472-73)

As though reading her thoughts, Emanuel probes: `Would Mademoiselle Lucy write for me if I asked her?' Part of the tragic nature of the book lies in the fact that such promise remains unfulfilled in terms of Lucy and Emanuel's potential as a couple. However, the novel itself represents a fulfilment of Lucy's own potential as writer/narrator.

It is significant that Lucy frequently characterizes herself in imagery denoting narration. She describes her narrative instincts shortly before her breakdown, when she is already seriously depressed, as accordingly distorted. She

begins to construe someone she knows to be unworthy as
 'heroine':

Ginevra gradually became with me a sort of heroine. One day, perceiving this growing illusion, I said, 'I really believe my nerves are getting overstretched: my mind has suffered somewhat too much; a malady is growing upon it - what shall I do? How shall I keep well?'
 (1985:231)

There is another important instance, here when she is well and her faculties alert, that Lucy casts a close acquaintance into a heroic mould. This time it is Paul Emanuel, cast in the role of hero - not only of her narrative but implicitly also of her life. Her new, more assured view of him is based on Père Silas's 'narrative'. She looks forward to testing her new perspective with reality. Her perspective is so rooted in images of narration that the face of her lover-to-be becomes 'a page'; by implication it has always been a page but is now 'a page more lucid, more interesting than ever'. Here Lucy depicts herself in terms of being an avid reader, but of course one in whom the power rests to incorporate the images and other findings of her reading into the writing of her own story. The ending of the novel particularly makes one realize that, whether or not Paul Emanuel has drowned, the final image one has of him rests in the hands, and specifically the pen, of Lucy Snowe, both as lover and as narrator.

It is significant that just prior to the friendship vow undertaken between Emanuel and Lucy - immediately after Père Silas has acquainted Lucy with some of the details of

Emanuel's past - Lucy depicts her new perspective of him as though she now has turned reader of 'the priest's narrative' in which Emanuel is her 'Christian hero':

After that visit to the Rue des Mages, I *did* want to see him again. I felt as if - knowing what I now knew - his countenance would offer a page more lucid, more interesting than ever; I felt a longing to trace in it the imprint of that primitive devotedness, the signs of that half-knightly, half-saintly chivalry which the priest's narrative imputed to his nature. He had become my Christian hero: under that character I wanted to view him.

(1985:491)

Père Silas is the author of this narrative, she, Lucy Snowe, the reader, or interpreter, and Emanuel himself the object, or written character, who becomes Lucy's subject of contemplation. This is all construed within the framework of the imagery of narration she uses, throughout which she maintains her own position as first-person narrator.

In relation to truth she presents herself as follows: 'I always, through my whole life, liked to penetrate to the real truth; I like seeking the goddess in her temple, and handling the veil, and daring the dread glance' (1985:564). In an apostrophe to 'Truth', 'Titaness amongst deities!', she expresses her preference for 'know[ing] the worst' rather than suffering uncertainty. Ironically, this desire for truth occurs within the context of her *misconstruction* that Justine Marie Sauveur⁷ is destined to be Emanuel's bride.

A significant break in the seemingly open confidential relationship Lucy Snowe as narrator has with the reader is found in the concealment of the true identity of Dr John. One

example of this would be Lucy's recognition of Dr John of Rue Fossette as Graham Bretton, whereupon she deliberately maintains her silence. Firstly, she does not reveal herself to him and secondly, she does not indicate her recognition of him to her reader: 'Lucy discusses her reasons for her silence twice, telling us in different ways that silence gives her power' (Nancy Rabinowitz, 1985:246). This is a form of power Lucy exerts indirectly - she is in the know and in a position to reveal this, both as character and as narrator - and her conscious resistance to doing so indicates a form of deliberate revelling in the power she has as narrator as well as in the anonymity her modest appearance provides her with vis-à-vis Bretton.

Commenting on the complexity of self-presentation and -definition in this novel, Kathryn Bond Stockton offers a psychoanalytic approach to *Villette*:

Perhaps the novel's most complicated knot involves the sexual economics of its form, for here the encounter between Victorian spiritual discourse and contemporary psychoanalysis occurs most dramatically. Crucial reasons exist why, in the case of *Villette*, we cannot be too quick to condemn the impetus to psychoanalyze Lucy Snowe - nor, more importantly, can we escape it. For her alienations, her partings from self, are not concealed in Brontë's novel but, rather, are put on textual display as the novel's main point. *Villette*, after all, thematizes how Lucy 'misses' herself. Yet these very depictions of Lucy - along with the novel's complete cast of characters - come to us through Lucy herself, through her own told tale.

Villette is Lucy Snowe and only Lucy Snowe. The clue then rests with *Villette*'s narration. What gets rendered as the unconscious of the character Lucy Snowe cannot be separated from whatever this novel knows on other terms than its narrator's stated understandings. What Brontë, along with her culture, cannot say or speak directly -

either because she knows it unconsciously or because it would be too risky to say - becomes visible in *Villette* as the unconscious of Lucy Snowe as narrator. *Villette*, then, begs a psychoanalysis of the narrating character because of the way it foregrounds Lucy's seductive disjunctions, her reluctance in telling, as the tale that is being told.

(1994:102-3)

Lucy's autobiographical account of her journey to maturity is compared with the more tentative process of reconstruction undertaken in psychoanalysis:

Lucy's retelling of her past ... reveals her present concerns of aloneness. Through her spiritual autobiography, the older Lucy, who rewrites the events of her younger life, resembles an analyst before the screen of her reader/analyst, telling these events (in past tense) with the immediacy and anticipation of her younger self. The form of *Villette* even positions the reader to interpret the strange blanks of Lucy's discourse, for Lucy herself directly addresses the reader at junctures.

(1994:104)

Lucy's silence about the identity of Dr John as her godmother's son, Graham Bretton, is one of the 'strange blanks' which challenge the reader's interpretative skills and makes Lucy remain mysterious. She never becomes the proverbial open book.

* * *

Clearly, therefore, elements of Lucy's self-presentation as character overlap with her self-presentation as narrator. The feminist dimension here lies in Lucy's insistence on her lack of conventional beauty and her initially dowdy image. Aspects of Lucy's negative self-image almost provoke the question whether she takes a perverse delight in its presentation to the reader. At other times, her consciousness

of her body, its habillements, its lack of feminine charms seems painful.

When one considers Lucy's lack of attractive or even distinctive physical attributes, there is a remarkable emphasis on her physical appearance. In fact, when it comes to the physical presentation of the body (its imaging) in the Brontës, there is a far greater prevalence of this in Charlotte than in Emily and Anne - yet there is less conventional prettiness and physical appeal in Charlotte's heroines than in Emily's and Anne's, who take good looks for granted in their heroines, with the exception of Agnes Grey. This of course relates to the famous conversation (already cited) between Emily, Anne and Charlotte on this issue, in which we realize the extent of Charlotte's ideological commitment to depicting the fate of a 'plain' woman. To Emily and Anne's objections that a heroine *had* to be beautiful, Charlotte responded, 'I shall take a heroine as small and plain as myself and make her as interesting as any of yours.'⁸ This decision could be construed in contemporary terms as a feminist resistance to society's tendency to overemphasize women's appearance in terms of conventional ideas of beauty.⁹ By deliberately choosing as heroine a character who is not physically attractive in the conventional sense, Charlotte Brontë is implicitly protesting that not only conventionally beautiful women are interesting or have destinies worth following. By providing a plain woman with the opportunity to

describe the destiny she partly encounters and partly creates, Charlotte Brontë is in some ways making a radical feminist statement, namely, that the telling of this woman's story is a profound act of self-definition for the narrator as well as for the reader.

On the occasion of Emanuel's 'fête', for instance, Lucy tells us that 'the courage was not in [her] to put on a transparent white dress'; instead, she

lit upon a crape-like material of purple-gray - the colour, in short, of dun mist, lying on a moor in bloom. My *tailleuse* had kindly made it as well as she could; because, as she judiciously observed, it was 'si triste - si peu voyant,' care in the fashion was the more imperative: it was well she took this view of the matter, for I had no flowers, no jewel to relieve it; and, what was more, I had no natural rose of complexion.

We become oblivious of these deficiencies in the uniform routine of daily drudgery, but they *will* force upon us their unwelcome blank on those bright occasions when beauty should shine.

(1985:200)

A phrase like 'when beauty *should* shine' (my emphasis) shows that despite the apparent feminist conviction of the narrator that external beauty is often a trivial concern, there are instances when Lucy as character is singularly aware of its lack. That Charlotte herself had a similarly vexed relationship with her physical self is apparent from various letters and recorded conversations with her sisters and friends.¹⁰ She is in principle committed to women not having to be physically attractive in any kind of conventional way and yet puts perhaps her own subconscious sentiments into Lucy the narrator's comment that there are occasions 'when beauty

should shine'. George Smith certainly believed 'that she would have given all her genius and her fame to have been beautiful' (1902:91, as cited in endnote 10).

The objectivity and accuracy of Lucy Snowe's physical self-image are revealed in her 'mirror experience' represented in studiously neutral terms. Here it is made very clear to the reader that it is not false modesty governing Lucy's depiction of herself but that she is objective in the descriptions of herself suggesting that she truly is not physically prepossessing:

I just now see that group, as it flashed upon me for one moment. A handsome middle-aged lady in dark velvet; a gentleman who might be her son - the best face, the finest figure, I thought, I had ever seen; a third person in a pink dress and black lace mantle.

I noted them all - the third person as well as the other two - and for the fraction of a moment, believed them all strangers, thus receiving an impartial impression of their appearance. But the impression was hardly felt and not fixed, before the consciousness that I faced a great mirror, filling a compartment between two pillars, dispelled it: the party was our own party. Thus for the first, and perhaps only time in my life, I enjoyed the 'giftie' of seeing myself as others see me. No need to dwell on the result. It brought a jar of discord, a pang of regret; it was not flattering, yet, after all, I ought to be thankful: it might have been worse.

(1985:286)

Lucy Snowe's self-image thus consists of an interesting amalgam of consciousness of superior intelligence and a very dowdy physical image (she had gone into paroxysms of panic when her godmother had the pink dress made for her, habituated as she was to blacks, browns and greys). Again, one sees here evidence of Charlotte's commitment to portraying a heroine who

is not pretty by conventional standards and who is clearly aware of this. It will be towards the end of the novel that she will require and receive her beloved's reassurance that she physically pleases him.¹¹

Not only is Lucy Snowe very frank in her description of her own response to this objective glimpse of her person, the passage also reveals the marked contrast between her response to the physiques of Bretton and Emanuel. She has the highest admiration for the former ('the best face, the finest figure, I thought, I had ever seen'), while at this stage in the novel the latter is frequently viewed as somewhat ludicrous: 'a very cross little man' (1985:299) is her own description of him to Bretton on the evening of the concert. She shows at least partial understanding of his character, his motivations, his view of himself, his pleasures, his dislikes, and there is a growing affection in her comments: 'Really that little man was dreadful: a mere sprite of caprice and ubiquity: one never knew either his whim or his whereabouts' (1985:322). Despite the tyrannical element in his nature, she is not intimidated by him. Because she occasionally ridicules him, she is not awed by him.

Again in the following passage, Lucy as narrator reveals a marked self-consciousness about her 'staid' image and the effect it has on others, and suggests the discrepancy between these and the intense emotion in fact pervading her inner life:

... I had a staid manner of my own which ere now had been as good to me as cloak and hood of hodden gray; since under its favour I had been enabled to achieve with impunity, and even approbation, deeds that if attempted with an excited and unsettled air, would in some minds have stamped me as a dreamer and zealot.

(1985:104)

She makes a sweeping and very unflattering statement about the type of woman the pretty Ginevra Fanshawe is, not only thereby delegating Ginevra to a type rather than an individual but also reinforcing the impression of herself as being somewhat biased against physically well endowed women, as already noted:

Many a time since have I noticed, in persons of Ginevra Fanshawe's light, careless temperament, and fair, fragile style of beauty, an entire incapacity to endure: they seem to sour in adversity, like small-beer in thunder: the man who takes such a woman for his wife, ought to be prepared to guarantee her an existence all sunshine.

(1985:118)

Equally interesting, of course, is Ginevra's response to Lucy. After treating her without much respect over a period of time, using her according to her own whims, she eventually expostulates: 'Who are you, Miss Snowe?' 'Do - do tell me who you are? ...' (1985:392); ... proving 'her incapacity to conceive how any person not bolstered up by birth or wealth, not supported by some consciousness of name or connection, could maintain an attitude of reasonable integrity' (1985:394).

There is a marked contrast between Lucy Snowe and Ginevra. The latter is extremely pretty; and unscrupulously uses her charms to trap and extort material gifts from

eligible men. An interesting function of Ginevra's is the way in which she provides a vehicle for the reader to perceive how Lucy is defined by others. With reference to the grotesque and bizarre disguise adopted by Alred de Hamal on his visits to Ginevra and Lucy's stoically enduring all his apparitions to her, she says, for instance:

'I should have gone mad; but then you have such nerves! - real iron and bend leather! I believe you feel nothing. You haven't the same sensitiveness that a person of my constitution has. You seem to me insensible both to pain and fear and grief. You are a real old Diogenes.'

(1985:574)

This passage marks a graphic contrast between what Lucy has exposed of herself to the reader and what she has allowed Ginevra to see. It also of course reflects Ginevra's self-engrossment and insensitivity to the feelings of others. However, it serves as yet another useful reminder to the reader of Lucy's chill exterior and how she projects an image of self-command. Her inner battles are intensely private and a 'public' breakdown, such as occurs in the very next chapter, a few pages after Ginevra's description of Lucy, is therefore highlighted all the more as being unusual and indicating dire distress.

Another aspect of the contrast between Lucy and Ginevra pertains to the latter's careless contempt for Protestant-Catholic divisions and distinctions. It reveals an ignorance of the very real differences between Protestantism and Catholicism, and is used to suggest only a shallow adherence to the Christian faith. This is based on her own convenience

and the whim of the moment rather than on any creed or belief requiring conviction or commitment. Lucy on the other hand adheres with principle and conviction to her Protestant commitment.

Lucy yet again reveals herself not to be predisposed in favour of pretty girls. She rather scathingly refers to Polly Home, on several occasions, as a doll. Yet before long we realise that the apparently dull, dry exterior of Lucy Snowe is made to conceal a compassionate inner nature. When Polly as a child experiences the pain of separating from Bretton and doubting the extent of his care for her, Lucy's involvement is described as follows:

I saw the little thing shiver. 'Come to me,' I said, wishing, yet scarcely hoping, that she would comply: for she was a most strange, capricious, little creature, and especially whimsical with me. She came, however, instantly, like a small ghost gliding over the carpet. I took her in. She was chill; I warmed her in my arms. She trembled nervously; I soothed her. Thus tranquillized and cherished she at last slumbered.

(1985:92)

This seems clearly enough an act of charity, whereby the human warmth generated benefits both parties. Stockton argues that there is a lesbian attraction on the part of Lucy Snowe for both the young Pauline and Ginevra. I entirely disagree. Stockton views this 'first clear instance of a female embrace in *Villette*' as 'a particularly Irigarayan fiction of a feminine mirroring: one that makes women familiar to themselves by passing them through an other's opacity' (1994:128). The passage cited by Stockton (which I too have

cited above) is taken entirely out of context by her and indicates instead Lucy's longing for warmth and intimacy and her capacity to offer this. The emphasis in the given chapter is entirely on Pauline and her sense of desolation. Lucy's compassionate awareness of this proud little person's loneliness and her empathy in this regard along with a willingness and even desire to offer comfort should not be interpreted as necessarily sexual.

Lucy shares with her reader a rather rare moment of sentiment, and again reveals herself eminently capable of experiencing and expressing the maternal instinct:

I affected Georgette; she was a sensitive and a loving child: to hold her in my lap, or carry her in my arms was to me a treat. To-night she would have me lay my head on the pillow of her crib; she even put her little arms round my neck. Her clasp and the nestling action with which she pressed her cheek to mine, made me almost cry with a tender pain. Feeling of no kind abounded in that house; this pure little drop from a pure little source was too sweet: it penetrated deep, and subdued the heart, and sent a gush to the eyes.

(1985:188-89)

As with the young Paulina, Lucy Snowe shows herself as responding lovingly, protectively, and maternally to a young girl. It is not insignificant, I think, that the narrator in *Villette* becomes far gentler in her presentation of Polly and her sensitivity, beauty and charm towards the end of the novel, as she accepts Paulina's devotion to Bretton - accompanied as this is by his waning attention to herself as he falls in love with Paulina. This would also seem to reflect Lucy's own growing sense of attractiveness and self-worth as

she becomes the object of Emanuel's love and attention. To a modern-day reader, there hardly seems to me to be the problem Harriet Martineau professed to have with *Villette* indicated in a review which was to cause a rift between herself and Charlotte: 'the heroine, who tells her own story, leaves the reader at last under the uncomfortable impression of her having either entertained a double love, or allowed one to supersede another without notification of the transition' (*Daily News*, 3 February 1853:2). This also seems to me to represent a misunderstanding of the exact nature of Lucy's relationships with the two men: in the case of Bretton, it is admiration coupled with an appreciation of his physique; with Emanuel, it is an intellectual and spiritual bond, which proves to be both unique and intimate.

Despite Lucy's awareness of his youthful faults, she places Bretton on a pedestal. He is thus in some ways comparable to St John Rivers in *Jane Eyre*. Both resemble Greek gods, and both have a spiritual thrust in their work: Rivers is a missionary; Bretton an admirably humanitarian medical doctor. In this way they incarnate an ideal. Yet the man the heroine ends up with is by contrast endearingly human and imperfect. In the case of *Jane Eyre*, it is marriage to the disempowered Rochester and, in the case of *Villette*, Lucy eventually forms an alliance with Emanuel. To the perfect man the female can but be a complement, a pale shadow, a dim reflection. In both the cases of Rochester and Emanuel the

woman is needed and appreciated and her power is recognized. Also, the woman's awareness of the male's crying imperfections and blatant faults gives her a sense of playing a role of positive worth in his life. In a society which offered women limited scope, such an opportunity for finding meaning was precious.¹²

Lucy's strange ideas on the discrepancy between men and women, or at least between one particular man - Graham Bretton - and herself, are suggested by how she appreciates his response to her reflections on art:

It was pleasant also to tell him some things he did not know - he listened so kindly, so teachably; unformalized by scruples lest so to bend his bright handsome head, to gather a woman's rather obscure and stammering explanation, should imperil the dignity of his manhood.
(1985:282)

Rather than ironically meant, the phraseology instead tends to suggest that such 'scruples' would almost be legitimate. It is significant that Lucy has no such scruples in thrashing out issues of equality with the man whom she finally agrees to live with in mutual devotion.

* * *

Emanuel and Lucy's relationship is presented in feminist and religious terms. The Protestant-Catholic controversy reveals the importance of the character/narrator's belief system in terms of defining herself. Her independence of belief in religious terms both suggests and foregrounds her independence *as woman*.

Firstly, the relationship between Emanuel and Lucy is

that of professor and teacher as well as professor and pupil:

Now I knew, and had long known, that that hand of M. Emanuel's was on intimate terms with my desk; that it raised and lowered the lid, ransacked and arranged the contents, almost as familiarly as my own. ... I saw the brownie's work, in exercises left overnight full of faults, and found next morning carefully corrected: I profited by his capricious goodwill in loans full welcome and refreshing. Between a sallow dictionary and worn-out grammar would magically grow a fresh interesting new work, or a classic, mellow and sweet in its ripe age. Out of my work-basket would laughingly peep a romance, under it would lurk the pamphlet, the magazine, whence last evening's reading had been extracted. Impossible to doubt the source whence these treasures flowed: had there been no other indication, one condemning and traitor peculiarity common to them all, settled the question - *they smelt of cigars.*

(1985:430-31)

What characterizes even this aspect of Emanuel and Lucy's relationship is its deeply personal nature. The secret nature of their intellectual transactions heightens the intensity which becomes progressively more characteristic of their exchanges. While Lucy's intellectual growth is in some ways plotted by Emanuel, her intelligence, application and ability to respond independently are appreciated by him. She is recognized as having a mind of her own.

In the chapter dealing with Lucy's visit to an art gallery whose chief exhibit was 'The Cleopatra', Emanuel airs his supremely non-egalitarian views on women. He accuses Lucy of lacking 'the qualities which might constitute a Sister of Mercy', an observation which Lucy places in its Catholic context, of which 'the self-denying and self-sacrificing' aspects 'commanded the homage of his soul'. To Lucy's question whether 'Monsieur ... himself' could nurse 'hospitals-full of

... unfortunates' similar to Marie Broc, the 'crétin', Emanuel replies: 'Women who are worthy the name ought infinitely to surpass our coarse, fallible, self-indulgent sex, in the power to perform such duties.' His assessment of Lucy is that 'Vous valez peu de chose.' Yet a few seconds later, with grudging admiration: 'You nurslings of Protestantism astonish me. You unguarded English women walk calmly amidst red-hot ploughshares and escape burning...' (1985:279-80). Here the relationship between the Protestant-Catholic debate raging between Emanuel and Lucy and 'the woman question' is evident - at least insofar as both these controversial issues are presented in this novel. Lucy's gentle mockery of Emanuel is also accompanied by a firm resistance to be limited to his typically Catholic stereotyping of what a woman should be and what a woman should see. This is further proven by Emanuel's insistence that Lucy turn her gaze from boldly beholding the infamous 'Cleopatra' to studying instead 'four pictures of a woman's life'. Lucy replies in a tone bordering on ridicule and irony: 'Excuse me, M. Paul; they are too hideous: but if you admire them, allow me to vacate my seat and leave you to their contemplation' (1985:280). Emanuel's stereotypes of what a Christian woman should be are seriously challenged both by Lucy's independence of spirit and mind.

Secondly, in the chapter entitled 'Fraternity', immediately after Lucy has been given the 'narrative' of Emanuel's romantic history with Justine Marie, there occurs the formation of what turns out to be a very temporary

brother-sister bond. After Lucy was invited by Emanuel to 'be the sister of a very poor, fettered, burdened, encumbered man', Lucy describes herself as 'content with this my voluntary, self-offering friend' (1985:500-01). However, the very title of the next chapter, 'The Apple of Discord', points to the Protestant-Catholic opposition at the religious core of the novel which still needs to be overcome by Lucy and Emanuel if any deeper relationship is to be formed. The fragility of the brother-sister connection is highlighted in the following passage:

My wish was to get a more thorough comprehension of this fraternal alliance: to note with how much of the brother he would demean himself when we met again; to prove how much of the sister was in my own feelings; to discover whether I could summon a sister's courage, and he a brother's frankness.

He came. Life is so constructed that the event does not, cannot, will not, match the expectation. ... He was fatherly to his pupils, but he was not brotherly to me. ... to my portion fell one nod - hurried, shy.

(1985:503-04)

It is evident that the intensity of the sexual dimension of consciousness between them inhibits the spontaneity of their interaction. The attempt - specifically on Emanuel's part - to deny this consciousness serves only to heighten it.

When Lucy realises that what has soured the sweet taste of the newly formed brother-sister pact is nothing less than a blight on Emanuel's strongly Catholicized conscience, she deduces that, after drawing closer to a non-Catholic, herself, Paul, the 'penitent',

had been with his director; permitted to withhold nothing; suffered to keep no corner of his heart sacred

to God and to himself; the whole narrative of our late interview had been drawn from him; he had avowed the covenant of fraternity, and spoke of his adopted sister.

With irony Lucy imagines and depicts the Church's response.

Again she uses the term 'heretic' with regard to herself:

How could such covenant, such adoption be sanctioned by the Church? Fraternal communion with a heretic! I seemed to hear Père Silas annulling the unholy pact; warning his penitent of its perils; entreating, enjoining reserve, nay, by the authority of his office, and in the name, and by the memory of all M. Emanuel held most dear and sacred, commanding the enforcement of that new system whose frost had pierced to the marrow of my bones.

(1985:508)

It is significant that Lucy here refers to the 'new system' of silence and separation between herself and Emanuel, of being shunned by him, as one 'whose frost had pierced to the marrow of [her] bones' (my italics): her surname in the original manuscript having been 'Frost', was later changed to Snowe. The implication here is presumably that having felt his 'support like that of some rock' and having seen herself 'become strong and rich: in a moment I was made substantially happy', Lucy now is thrown back upon her own 'chilly' resources. The contentment derived from Emanuel's volunteering of himself in 'true friendship' (his phrase) had been expressed by Lucy in the following terms: 'I envied no girl her lover, no bride her bridegroom, no wife her husband; I was content with this my voluntary, self-offering friend' (1985:500-1). It is revealing of Lucy's true feelings for Emanuel that she uses terms indicating sexual bonding and progressive commitment (girl-lover, bride-bridegroom, wife-

husband) to characterize her apparently asexual 'fraternal' relationship with Emanuel.

What is conveyed is Emanuel's impression of Lucy's intensity, her capacity for passion, for passionate contempt at times. As a way of counteracting Emanuel's objections Lucy defines their commonality in terms of the basic essentials of the Christian faith: "I am not a heathen, I am not hard-hearted, I am not unchristian, I am not dangerous, as they tell you; I would not trouble your faith; you believe in God and Christ and the Bible, and so do I." To this protestation Emanuel responds: "But do you believe in the Bible? Do you receive Revelation? What limits are there to the wild, careless daring of your country and sect? Père Silas dropped dark hints" (1985:512). He is hereby showing that he remains nervous of Lucy's daring in openly expressing her contempt for Catholicism, and suggesting that he has not yet resolved the greater weightiness of their commonality in the faith than of the differences between them. However, Lucy reassures him - and the terms in which she presents their discussion again reveal an important element of the narrator's self-presentation. It is linked to the autobiographical mode in which the novel is written, and is based on the clear distinction between herself as confident writer and stammering speaker:

That night M. Paul and I talked seriously and closely. He pleaded, he argued. I could not argue - a fortunate incapacity ... but I could talk in my own way - the way M. Paul was used to - and of which he could follow the

meanderings and fill the hiatus, and pardon the strange stammerings, strange to him no longer. At ease with him, I could defend my creed and faith in my own fashion ...

Like Jane Eyre, Lucy Snowe in part derives her sense of independence from her fierce sense of Protestantism - being created as an individual and being uniquely accountable to her Maker. Lucy's ecumenical spirit is further reflected in her going `by turns, and indiscriminately, to the three Protestant Chapels of Villette - the French, German, and English - id est, the Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopalian':

Such liberality argued in the Father's eyes [i.e. to the priest who once received Lucy's confession, Père Silas] profound indifference - who tolerates all, he reasoned, can be attached to none.

The explanation Lucy as narrator provides contains a form of Protestant critique from within. She recognizes `the unity and identity of their vital doctrines' and sees `nothing to hinder them from being one day fused into one grand Holy Alliance ...' Her criticism is construed in terms of `faults of form; incumbrances, and trivialities': `Just what I thought, that did I tell M. Emanuel, and explained to him that my own last appeal, the guide to which I looked, and the teacher which I owned, must always be the Bible itself, rather than any sect, of whatever name or nation.' When referring to Emanuel's prayer for Lucy addressed to Mary, `Reine du Ciel', Lucy contrasts his passionate desire for her conversion to Catholicism with her own relative tolerance of doctrinal differences: `Strange! I had no such feverish wish to turn him from the faith of his fathers. I thought Romanism wrong, a

great mixed image of gold and clay; but it seemed to me that this Romanist held the purer elements of his creed with an innocence of heart which God must love' (1985:513-4).

It is significant that Lucy's perspective on Catholicism, the creed to which her would-be lover is such a faithful adherent, gives her an edge of superiority over him - at least in her own eyes. This is comparable, it seems to me, and not entirely dissimilar in terms of power relations, to the edge Jane Eyre's eyesight - as compared to Rochester's lack of it - gives her at the end of *Jane Eyre*. In both cases the demure woman, in a subservient position to the man, becomes convinced through circumstances and self-assertion of her existential equality to him, and even aspects of superiority. The frighteningly final and condemning statements such as 'God is not with Rome' (1985:515), which Lucy makes, reveal the strength of her convictions and an almost arrogant assertiveness that her dogmas are correct where Emanuel's are wrong. Already, her rather supercilious judgment of the (de)merits of the Catholic book Emanuel left in her desk provided useful insights into the opinion of Catholicism Lucy perseveres in - despite attempts by Père Silas to lure her into accepting 'Romish superstition'. Emanuel's adherence to Catholicism almost becomes the stumbling-block for the deepening - and eventual transformation - of the so-called fraternal relationship between them. However, finally, despite the pressure of Père Silas and the more selfishly motivated

Madame Beck, it is at the end of this very chapter that the Protestant-Catholic division is effectively overcome in the mutual respect and tolerance exhibited between Lucy and Emanuel. What emerges as more significant than their respective commitments to their different creeds, is the identity they share in terms of their common Christian faith. After trying in vain to convert her from her 'strange, self-reliant, invulnerable creed', her 'terrible, proud, earnest Protestantism' to Catholicism, Emanuel comes to recognize that he and Lucy share a common prayer, that of any believing sinner: 'God be merciful to me, a sinner!'

Thirdly, therefore, her earlier conflict between the love of God and the love of (an individual) man as evinced by her close to hero-worship of Bretton seems resolved, as well as that between Protestantism and Catholicism:

Adherent to his own religion (in him was not the stuff of which is made the facile apostate), he *freely* left me my pure faith. He did not tease nor tempt. He said:-

'Remain a Protestant. My little English Puritan, I love Protestantism in you. I own its severe charm. There is something in its ritual I cannot receive myself, but it is the sole creed for "Lucy."'

All Rome could not put into him bigotry, nor the Propaganda itself make him a real Jesuit. He was born honest, and not false - artless, and not cunning - a freeman, and not a slave.

(My italics; 1985:594-95)

Emanuel's independence of spirit has saved him from the typically Romish slavery, according to Lucy's not unbiased perspective. To the narrator of this tale 'free' and 'pure' are the terms associated with Protestantism while 'cunning' and 'craft' are viewed as the particular attributes of

Jesuitry, the branch of Catholicism under most vehement attack in this novel. What is represented by the union of Emanuel and Lucy is harmony in complementarity: her chilly exterior is enhanced and melted by his fiery, explosive nature. Her own inner fire is appreciated and responded to by him. Her aloof pose, her self-defensive armour - necessary to a foreign woman without independent economic means - can be dropped as she is enclosed by his warm embrace. The battle between Protestantism and Catholicism is therefore both externalized and resolved in terms of the relationship between Emanuel and Lucy. As they move from a short-lived brother-sister contract in which their doctrinal differences become an 'apple of discord', so their way of resolving this conflict suggests that the fundamental commonality between Protestantism and Catholicism can be made the basis of a love relationship.

The Catholic-Protestant debate in *Villette* could be construed as an objective correlative for dealing with unresolved inner conflict between Feeling and Reason within Lucy.¹³ According to Lawson,

Passion and desire are not condoned by Catholicism, for while the confessional allows expression of the passions it adulterates them; it pries into the secrets of the human heart in order to enslave it. Whereas Protestant Reason tries to bar the unconscious impulse, to refuse it any access to consciousness, Catholicism seeks to understand desire, and then, with that understanding, to enslave it, to sublimate it, to redirect the desire and fix it upon another object. The Catholic response to desire seems to be not repression but enforced sublimation.

(1991:59)

While aspects of Lawson's analysis of Catholicism seem

problematical, controversial and stereotypical, it does provide insight into Lucy's unconscious motivation for seeking the solace of Catholicism in the first place. Her venture into the confessional, that is, into the very heart of Catholicism, reveals an unconscious desire for a spiritual home which is not fully provided by Protestantism. Her relationship with Emanuel (which means 'God with us') comes in some ways to be such a nurturing, compassionate, spiritual home, even embodied in physical space in his provision for her of her own school and home. The religious debate in the novel is thus not purely about divisions between Protestantism and Catholicism but more centrally, perhaps, it is there to reveal Lucy's initial lack of personal integration and subsequent gaining of it.

* * *

The very deliberately created ambiguity of the ending of the novel relates to both the feminist and religious dimensions of *Villette*. With all its ambiguity, and possibly because of it, the ending of the novel confirms the transcendence of the Protestant-Catholic conflict. Charlotte Brontë responded to objections at Emanuel's drowning - from readers as influential as her father - by making his death less explicit in order to 'leave sunny imaginations hope'. In her day there were a few readers whose 'sunny imaginations' insisted on hoping that Paul Emanuel somehow miraculously survived the storm and shipwreck. However, there were the other imaginations (including Charlotte Brontë's own) which

could not conceive of Emanuel (God with us) as present - but instead viewed him as radically, finally and irrevocably absent - through death. Many critics take his name to be ironic but to me his name seems to point to a transcendent presence and fulfilment beyond the earthly destiny of such as himself and Lucy Snowe. The latter - in her capacity as narrator - makes a clear distinction between the destiny of the blessed few - the Paulinas and the Grahams¹⁴ - and 'those called to suffer', among whom she proudly counts herself.

In both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, the heroine has to pass through an existential crisis, which comprises emotional, spiritual and physical components, before she is able to become a more integrated person. She is then more wholly herself, more coherent, more clear about her own directions and capabilities and able, it would seem, to reintegrate at a higher level.

In an (excessively?) neat reading of *Villette*, Lucy Snowe's journey is presented by Susan Kavaler-Adler (1990:37-41) as one in which false feminine options are shed on the road to integration. Incorporating aspects of repressed male and female sides is shown to be desirable as part of the process of individuation - for women and men respectively, with special reference to Lucy and Emanuel. While the idea of heterosexual love is presented as desirable, 'the author of *Villette* reminds us that ... [male] affirmation must never be won at the price of playing to false female images either to

please or to oppose men' (1990:43).

With regard to questions of identity and the self as presented in this novel, I agree with Kavalier-Adler in her presentation of the 'underlying female conflict that pervades the novel of *Villette*':

The heroine and narrator, Lucy Snowe, is continually torn between a craving for male affirmation and a determination to not be molded into extrinsic definitions or images of what she should be. Whether encountering a single man [such as Graham Bretton] or representatives of patriarchal society as a whole [such as Mme Beck herself], she is continually challenged to surrender her struggle toward autonomy and intrinsically defined identity.

(1990:38)

The ending of *Villette*, however, presents even more complex possibilities and deliberately defies a reading as conclusive as Kavalier-Adler's. What is true is that the persona of the narrator, very much in charge of her own story, has clearly reached a point of articulation, of comprehension, of understanding and acceptance of her own story, which enables her to tell it with the steely control she uses. Yet there is simultaneously the cloudy, chilly, suffering aspect which the narrator appears to claim as her own in contrast to the 'hope' which she leaves 'sunny imaginations'.

Where *Jane Eyre* boasts, 'Reader, I married him', the third paragraph of the final chapter of *Villette* famously reads: 'M. Emanuel was away three years. Reader, they were the three happiest years of my life. Do you scout the paradox? Listen.' This provocative paragraph is followed by the

statement of a dual triumph, a combination of effort and 'luck': 'I worked hard' and 'I ... took the cash [from Miss Marchmont's estate] and made it useful' (1985:593). Betrothed as she may be to a Catholic, the Protestant work ethic and the concept of reward for effort continues to be endorsed by Lucy in these final pages. (In fact, Lucy's tends to be a world without much grace. It is as though she sees grace showered on those around her - Paulina, Ginevra, the Brettons - rather than on herself.)

About the Reverend Patrick Brontë's pressure on Charlotte to provide a 'happy ending' for *Villette*, Rabinowitz has this to say:

We know that the current ending of the novel was in some sense dictated by Brontë's father; he wanted the novel to end with hero and heroine living happily ever after. The plot of the father, with its ideology of women's sexuality contained in marriage, is undercut, however, by its representation here. Instead of giving us one certain reading, Lucy gives us two ambiguous ones: Paul's drowning is never described, just a storm at sea.
(1985:251)

Peter Dale makes an important point with reference to Lucy's brief excursion into the present tense at the end of *Villette* and the implications of this for the ending of the novel. Like Thomas, Dale makes a very marked distinction between Lucy's consciousness and Charlotte's:

If Lucy has failed in her effort to rewrite the conditions of salvation, Brontë has been rather more successful in expressing the opposite condition.... There is a hiatus in the text, a silence of expectation; then she [Lucy] begins to write, but now in the present tense. ... we are filled with the same feeling of hope that Lucy appears to experience at the moment of writing... But the text of *Villette* goes beyond the moment of

expectation.... Lucy shifts to the past tense, and that shift goes to the heart of Brontë's realism. It signals the closing off of expectation, the fixing of perspective as something that was once possible but now is no longer....

We have in *Villette*, finally, another sort of endlessness than the Christian Eternity, and this is the condition of simply being without an end, without a shape to life. It is the condition of living perpetually in the 'blank' that is never completed, the 'pause' that never quite comes to a meaningful conclusion.

(1984:20-21)

From a feminist perspective there seems to me a more positive reading than either of Dale's alternatives allow, and that is a Christian feminist view. From this perspective Lucy would after all be seen to triumph as a woman, who has known what it is to love and be loved - wholly(/holy?) - and yet, without having had to yield her independence to one who remains as enigmatic and potentially autocratic as Emanuel. Hope made the three years happy, yet Anouilh's *Antigone* referred to 'le sale espoir' - renowned for its capacity to disappoint. Those 'three years were the happiest of [her] life', yet once hope (of a physical union with her lover) is dashed, are we expected to envisage a life as bleak as Miss Marchmont's? Was Lucy ever in danger - fully aware as she is of the faults and inadequacies of her suitor, indicated throughout the first two-thirds of the novel - of idolizing Emanuel the way she was in danger of doing with Bretton? Again, there seems to have been a greater equalizing taking place as was the case at the end of *Jane Eyre* after Rochester had become crippled and blind.

The ambiguity has thus been very deliberately created.

The optimistic reader is allowed to imagine whatever she wills, but the more realistic one, including Brontë herself, knows that Lucy Snowe faces a lonely future. Lawson writes on the ending of *Villette*:

It is here that the narrative of personal desire - her love for M. Paul, her hope for marriage - intersects with the narrative of theological desire - essentially a desire for the promised return of Christ. This intersection of the personal narrative with the theological narrative makes the end of the novel a kind of allegory. The ending relates an event that not only is central to Lucy Snowe's personal life, but also stands as a paradigm for the relation of the human to the divine. The writing of these two narratives constitutes the 'heretic narrative' that Lucy Snowe writes.
(1991:65-66)

Whether we see Lucy as finally whole or still divided, depends upon which aspect of the narrative we emphasize. If it is the purely personal aspect, then indeed it is a tragic novel. But if - as in the case of *Ruth*¹⁵ - the focus is on the spiritual dimension of the heroine's life, then the completion found by the heroine in her relationship with Christ becomes at least as significant as the earthly fulfilment offered by a human lover. It is in part through Emanuel's love for her that Lucy has come to a position of self-acceptance and self-love that make a measure of earthly happiness and contentment possible. Nevertheless, as is usual in Charlotte Brontë's novels, giving up her independence does not necessarily come easily to a central woman character.¹⁶

Villette is the only Brontë novel that does not end in marriage. It ends instead on a note filled with such ambivalence that it has kept critics wondering and speculating

for generations. As early as 1857, Émile Montegut expressed the opinion that '[a]fter reading *Villette*, one is as weary and defeated as the heroine': 'It is the nature of *Villette* to arouse quite the opposite feeling to that of *Jane Eyre*. In *Jane Eyre*, where imagination triumphs, the reader finally emerges, in spite of all, with an impression of happiness and joy' (cited in Allott, 1974:373).

Yet what the present ending allows is for the determined romantics (like Patrick Brontë) to imagine what they like - surely, though, without much conviction. For the more realistic reader, however, it is easier to accept that Lucy knew the joy of true love, for a brief (and not untraumatic) spell during their time together at the Pensionnat, and then, during Emanuel's prolonged absence. This is also in keeping with the general narrative tone of the novel where the narrator seems to harbour few, if any, illusions. Lucy is then seen to continue alone, as before, but knowing herself to have been loved and cherished and not reluctant still to be able to cling to her independence - spiritual, practical and economic. This strange paradox suggested by the fierce emotional dependence stemming from intense passion combined with a longing for independence is typical of the novels of Charlotte Brontë. It is seen in *The Professor*, *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*.¹⁷

The combination of ambivalence, solitude and intensity which has characterized Lucy Snowe throughout this novel is thus sustained right up to the end. What provides the sense of

power and control is what has by now been encapsulated in the person of the narrator - her confidence, her ability to manipulate her own narrative so skilfully that her reader is made a confidante strictly to the extent she chooses and knowingly determines.¹⁸

ENDNOTES

1. Thackeray's opinion was even more hurtfully expressed (to Lucy Baxter) but fortunately not discovered by the author:

it amuses me to read the author's naive confession of being in love with 2 men at the same time; and her readiness to fall in love at any time. The poor little woman of genius! the fiery little eager brave tremulous homely-faced creature! I can read a great deal of her life as I fancy in her book, and see that rather than have fame, rather than any other earthly good or mayhap heavenly one she wants some Tomkins or another to love and be in love with. But you see she is a little bit of a creature without a penny worth of good looks, thirty years old I should think, buried in the country and eating up her own heart there, and no Tomkins will come. You girls with pretty faces and red boots (and what not) will get dozens of young fellows fluttering about you - whereas here is one a genius, a noble heart longing to mate itself and destined to wither away into old maidenhood with no chance to fulfil the burning desire.

(11 March 1853; Allott, ed., 1974:193-4)

2. In her account of her letters to Graham Bretton, for instance, Lucy makes it clear that she could write eloquently (1985:335). The existence of her memoirs are also evidence of this, of course.

3. ...women as a group in our society are both produced and inhibited by contradictory discourses. Very broadly, they participate both in the liberal humanist discourse of freedom, self-determination and rationality and at the same time in the specifically feminine discourse offered by society of submission, relative inadequacy and irrational intuition. The attempt to locate a single and coherent subject-position within these contradictory discourses, and in consequence to find a non-contradictory pattern of behaviour, can create intolerable pressures. One way of responding to this situation is to retreat from the contradictions and from discourse itself, to become 'sick' - more women than men are treated for mental illness.

(Belsey, 1980:65-66)

4. The occasion is being suspected by Madame Beck of direct implication in a *billet-doux* incident on the grounds of the *pensionnat*. The actual perpetrator was Alfred de Hamal, suitor of the only other English girl on the premises, Ginevra Fanshawe.

5. She does not hesitate to include among them Paul Emanuel's first love Justine Marie (1985:484) and their daughter

(1985:63).

6. Gordon argues that Lucy Snowe's depiction of her correspondence with Graham Bretton is based on Brontë's experience with George Smith:

In his memoir of Charlotte Brontë, George Smith owned that he had 'stood for' Graham Bretton, and recalled that she had confirmed this to Mrs Gaskell.

(1994:214)

And:

...it was George Smith himself who suggested Cornhill - by implication, himself - as a subject for a novel. He came to figure as a decent, urbane, princely man, on the border of sympathies and understanding that lie beyond the conventions of the age. Could he cross that border? George Smith's chivalrous but rather shifting relation to Charlotte bears on her exploration of a women's buried needs in the course of *Villette*, between January 1850 and the end of 1852.

(1994:216)

7. Thomas argues convincingly that Justine Marie Sauveur, who appears towards the end of the novel, is in fact the biological daughter of M. Emanuel and Justine Marie, the young woman he loved and who died a nun. Thomas's point is that while Lucy communicates the relevant information for the reader to make this deduction, she herself remains unaware of this particular connection. In fact, M. Emanuel's charity is thus less disinterested than Lucy assumes it to be. His digging around the old Methusaleh is also more purposeful than Lucy knows - as this is presumably where his dead beloved lies buried.

8. A quotation from Charlotte Brontë's obituary written by Harriet Martineau was provided in Chapter 3 on p. 130 above, and is also cited in Gaskell, 1985:308.

9. Destroying a woman's instinctive affiliation with her natural body cheats her of confidence. It causes her to perseverate about whether she is a good person or not, and bases her self-worth on how she looks instead of who she is. ... It keeps her preoccupied, colors everything she does, plans, and anticipates.

... there is in many women a 'hungry' one inside. But rather than hungry to be a certain size, shape, or height, rather than hungry to fit the stereotype; women are hungry for basic regard from the culture surrounding them. The one inside is longing to be treated respectfully, to be accepted, and in the very least, to be met without stereo-

typing. If there really is a woman 'screaming to get out' she is screaming for cessation of the disrespectful projections of others onto her body, her face, her age.

(Clarissa Pinkola Estés, 1992:203)

10. When Charlotte started at Roe Head School 'Mary Taylor ... told her she was ugly' (Barker, 1994:172).

Ellen Nussey wrote sympathetically:

... certainly she was at this time anything but pretty; even her good points were lost. Her naturally beautiful hair of soft silky brown being then dry and frizzy-looking, screwed up in tight little curls, showing features that were all the plainer from her exceeding thinness and want of complexion, she looked 'dried in.' A dark, rusty green stuff dress of old-fashioned make detracted still more from her appearance.

(Brontë Society, *Transactions*, 2 (10):62)

Elizabeth Gaskell's opinion on first meeting her is expressed as follows in a letter to Catherine Winkworth:

She is (as she calls herself) undeveloped; thin and more than 1/2 a head shorter than I, soft brown hair, not so dark as mine; eyes (very good and expressive looking straight & open at you) of the same colour, a reddish face; large mouth & many teeth gone; altogether plain; the forehead square, broad, and rather overhanging.

(25 August 1850; Chapple & Pollard, eds, 1966:123)

The artist John Everett Millais commented that 'she looked tired with her own brains' (Brontë Society, *Transactions*, 4 (19):116).

Perhaps the most appealing portrait is provided by John Stores Smith, a young writer:

She was diminutive in height, and extremely fragile in figure. Her hand was one of the smallest I have ever grasped. She had no pretensions to being considered beautiful, and was far removed from being plain. She had rather light brown hair, somewhat thin, and drawn plainly over her brow. Her complexion had no trace of colour in it, and her lips were pallid also; but she had a most sweet smile, with a touch of tender melancholy in it....

[Her eyes] looked you through and through - and you felt they were forming an opinion of you ... by a subtle penetration into the very marrow of your mind, and the innermost core of your soul'.

(Brontë Society, *Transactions*, 16 (81):22-23)

George Smith commented provocatively:

There was but little feminine charm about her; and of this fact she herself was uneasily and perpetually conscious. It may seem strange that the possession of genius did not lift her above the weakness of an excessive anxiety about her personal appearance. But I believe that she would have given all her genius and her fame to have been beautiful. Perhaps few women ever existed more anxious to be pretty than she, or more angrily conscious of the circumstance that she was *not* pretty.

(1902:91)

11. The dialogue in question between Lucy and Emanuel in the penultimate chapter of the novel reads as follows:

'Do I displease your eyes *much*?' I took courage to urge: the point had its vital import for me.

He stopped, and gave me a short, strong answer - an answer which silenced, subdued, yet profoundly satisfied. Ever after that, I knew what I was for *him*; and what I might be for the rest of the world, I ceased painfully to care.

(1985:583)

Not conveying Emanuel's actual response intensifies the reader's impression of the bond of intimacy between the lovers.

12. Helen Huntingdon was similarly challenged by Arthur Huntingdon's imperfections though in her case she was unable to influence him for good. The relationship between Helen and Arthur Huntingdon is of course discussed at some length in Chapter 2.

13. This is how she describes the two warring strands within her nature when she deals with her response to Graham Bretton's letters.

14. In the chapter on Graham Bretton and Paulina de Bassompierre's decision to marry and subsequent life (entitled 'Sunshine'), Brontë writes:

Some real lives do - for some certain days or years - actually anticipate the happiness of Heaven; and, I believe, if such perfect happiness is once felt by good people (to the wicked it never comes), its sweet effect is never wholly lost.... I do believe there are some human beings so born, so reared, so guided from a soft cradle to a calm and late grave, that no excessive suffering penetrates their lot, and no tempestuous blackness overcasts their journey. And often, these are not pampered, selfish beings, but Nature's elect, harmonious and benign, men and

women mild with charity, kind agents of God's kind attributes.
(1985:532)

15. The significance of the ending of *Ruth* is explored on pp. 253-56 below.

16. Cf. the ending of *Shirley* and the contrast between the lassitude with which Shirley yields her power to Louis Moore and the joy with which Caroline embraces dependence on Robert Moore.

17. It is evident in the case of Shirley Keeldar's relationship with Louis Moore rather than in the relationship between Caroline Helstone and Robert Moore.

18. Charlotte Brontë's manipulation of Lucy's narrative is of course another whole issue, which has been provocatively dealt with by Syd Thomas (1990:567-83). Thomas draws a very marked and I think valid and significant distinction between Lucy's unawarenesses ('gaps' or 'blanks') as character/narrator and Charlotte's clues to the reader in her capacity as author/creator-of-Lucy. Thomas views the novel first and foremost as Charlotte's story and not Lucy's. He points out ironies, satires, incompletenesses of which Lucy (but not Charlotte as intentional author) is unaware, for example:

Lucy is at the mercy, so to speak, of those who tell her of Justine Marie, and therefore, so are we at the mercy of Lucy's narrative, that is, almost. We are at this late point in the novel, taught not to make 'kindly conclusions' too readily.

(1990:576)

And again:

Are all of these references (Jean Baptiste, Marie, Josef, Place of the Magi, Emanuel, Bethlehem, Sauveur, 'the Expected,' Madonna, a yule-log) to the Nativity a matter of coincidence? Lucy presents it so, but Charlotte does not!

Presumably then Justine Marie Walravens gives birth to her daughter and dies (or is thought to die) from childbirth and is buried under the Methusaleh pear tree in the garden behind the *pensionnat*.

(1990:579)

Of the title Thomas writes: '*Villette* appears to be Brontë's choice ... not Lucy Snowe's, which I think is an important distinction':

Those who read the novel primarily in terms of Lucy's search for (and attainment of) identity, often avoid discussion of the title and would, I think, have some difficulty explaining this self-effacing act. Why would a

strongly self-assertive Lucy not choose her own name or some other reference to herself for the title of her 'autobiography'?

(1990:567)

Thomas's point is that '[t]he text of *Villette* is Brontë's imaginary (and probably somewhat actual) eruption of that which would not, could not be repressed any longer' (1990:568). Thomas reinforces our sense that we are dealing in this novel perhaps more than the others with the rather messy terrain where clear boundaries between author, narrator and character crumble.

CHAPTER FIVE

ELIZABETH GASKELL:
passionate story-teller

... hers is a fiction of ideas, acting out the dilemmas that preoccupied her time.

(Uglow, 1993:x)

It is often necessary for women to establish their own self-worth and thereby assert or create values by which, it is suggested, their whole society may live. ... Essentially, binding together realism, gender and religion, there is in Mrs Gaskell's fiction a sense of values. These are not external, imposed standards of behaviour but internal discoveries and creations.

(Terence Wright, 1995:14)

The thrust of my argument in this chapter is that Gaskell gains increasing control over her narrative stance, and is progressively less controlled by it. The kind of narrative wobbles for which *Mary Barton* is notorious virtually vanish with later texts. The centrality of Christianity as theme in *Ruth* is echoed as a motif throughout Gaskell's fiction, and references become more oblique and complex in the later novels. Her last novel, *Wives and Daughters*, is often compared with the work of Jane Austen,¹ a novelist who is supremely in control of her material. The narrator in Elizabeth Gaskell's works moves between empathetic and moralistic extremes in *Mary Barton*, to impassioned spiritual discourse in *Ruth*, and culminates in the more global, sophisticated, lightly ironic stance of *Wives and Daughters*. As Gaskell's feminist points become bolder, so her narrative strategies become more subtle and her relationship with her reader more sophisticated.

Part of the fun of reading Gaskell is watching her

subtle play with the figure of the narrator', according to Uglow (1993:240). In her first novel *Mary Barton* this 'play' is hardly subtle, but by the time Gaskell writes *Wives and Daughters* she has indeed mastered the art of 'subtle play'. *North and South*, *Sylvia's Lovers* and *Cranford* all deserve detailed studies of their own, but the three novels I have chosen serve to highlight the chief point I wish to make, namely that Gaskell matures in her ability to maintain a consistent narrative position.

* * *

In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell's first novel, the apparently omniscient narrator keeps on getting entangled with the fictional material she is presenting. In her Preface (1848) to the first edition of *Mary Barton* Gaskell describes her motivation and thinking as novelist as follows:

Three years ago I became anxious (from circumstances that need not be more fully alluded to)² to employ myself in writing a work of fiction. Living in Manchester ... I bethought me how deep might be the romance in the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets of the town in which I resided. I had always felt a deep sympathy with the careworn men, who look as if doomed to struggle through their lives in strange alternations between work and want; tossed to and fro by circumstances, apparently in even a greater degree than other men. A little manifestation of this sympathy, and a little attention to the expression of feelings on the part of some of the work-people with whom I was acquainted, had laid open to me the hearts of one or two of the more thoughtful among them; I saw that they were sore and irritable against the rich, the even tenor of whose seeming happy lives appeared to increase the anguish caused by the lottery-like nature of their own. Whether the bitter complaints made by them, of the neglect which they experienced from the prosperous - especially from the masters whose fortunes they had helped to build up - were well-founded or no, it is not for me to judge. It is

enough to say that this belief of the injustice and unkindness which they endure from their fellow-creatures, taints what might be resignation to God's will, and turns it to revenge in too many of the poor uneducated factory workers of Manchester.

The more I reflected on this unhappy state of things between those so bound to each other by common interests, as the employers and the employed must ever be, the more anxious I became to give some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people; the agony of suffering without the sympathy of the happy, or of erroneously believing that such is the case.

(1970:37-38)

Such qualifications as this last one are typical of Gaskell as she tries not to take the side of the workers against their employers - or at least not to be seen to be doing so.

In the final section of the quotation we see that she has social, political and even religious aims in her writing. She explores the beliefs of the poor about the rich in examining the painful relations between the two groups. Also she comments on the effects of this belief on the religious life of the poor. She declares that as novelist she sees it as her role to articulate on behalf of 'this dumb people' when she refers to her anxiety to 'give some utterance to [their] agony'. If one considers Elizabeth Gaskell's securely middle-class Unitarian background, one recognizes that she showed not only courage and boldness venturing into this domain but also remarkable empathy and - generally - tact.

'Robberds' told his congregation that to despair of bringing about "beneficial changes in society" was a kind of impiety' (John Seed, 1982:5). Elizabeth Gaskell was not impious in this sense and her novels implicitly suggest hope

that the relations between industrial employer and exploited worker can be improved. As novelist she saw it as her task to change these relations by means of her fiction. 'Her religion is at the heart of her and of all she writes, and her social concern for those of whom she writes is a practical manifestation of that religion' (W.A. Craik, 1975:4). This is why I give Christianity the emphasis it gets in this chapter. I regard the religious framework as intricately bound to narration in these novels. Not only the world-view implicitly presented in the novels but also explicit references make Christianity of central significance. At times the references are gently satiric on the part of the narrator; at other times it is in the characters' dialogue or in descriptions of their motivation that religion is seen to play a dominant role. It provides the means of reconciliation to men from opposed classes and of consolation when earthly pleasures fail.

Seed points to a tension among the active Unitarians of the day. On the one hand, they were representatives of liberal culture 'both in their public pronouncements and in their very perception of the world' (1982:21). On the other, their interaction with the poor in their capacity as Sunday School teachers, home visitors, Unitarian ministers, and Domestic Missionaries challenged their assumptions. William Gaskell was secretary to the Domestic Mission throughout the 1840s and Elizabeth Gaskell was active both as Sunday School teacher and home visitor. She lamented the lack of personal involvement in

any kind of social work among those Unitarians

who steadily refuse Mr Gaskell's entreaties that they will give their time to anything, but will give him or me tens and hundreds, that won't do half the good that individual intercourse and earnest conscientious thought for others would do.

(Cited in Seed, 1982:23)

Mary Barton emerged in precisely this context, where the Unitarians' faith in their liberal framework was being threatened by the harsh and undeserved suffering of even those who were morally virtuous, industrious and sober among the working class.

In *Mary Barton*, subtitled *A Tale of Manchester Life*, Gaskell's main characters are firmly working-class. Originally she planned that John Barton be the hero of the novel but Gaskell's publishers persuaded her to change the title and main topic to 'Mary Barton', making the destiny of a female character central. Her original focus is clearly conveyed in the opening chapter with John Barton's comments revealing his perception of the rich:

'... Don't think to come over me with the old tale, that the rich know nothing of the trials of the poor. I say, if they don't know, they ought to know. We are their slaves as long as we can work; we pile up their fortunes with the sweat of our brows; and yet we are to live as separate as if we were in two worlds; ay, as separate as Dives and Lazarus, with a great gulf betwixt us: but I know who was best off then,' and he wound up his speech with a low chuckle that had no mirth in it.

(1970:45)

The reminder of the after-life and the dire consequences of rich ignoring poor are spelt out here by John Barton. His mirthless anticipation of an eventual reversal of the fortunes

of the rich and the poor implicitly contain a warning on the part of the narrator to middle-class readers who may be potential or actual oppressors. Her reliance on Christianity as a means to bring about a reconciliation between 'masters and men' is most evident in this novel, although also subtly present in *North and South*.

It is commonly acknowledged that there is some fumbling in the treatment of the original hero of the novel partly because John Barton was first sympathetically depicted as revolutionary and then less so as murderer/criminal. Ruth Yeazell regards the novel as one which, first of all,

entertains the possibility of violence, even half-sympathizes with it, only to take refuge at critical moments in the representation of female innocence, exchanging a politically dangerous man for a sexually unaggressive young woman, and a narrative that threatens drastic change for one that proves reassuringly static.

(1985:127)

This rather unsympathetic reading overlooks the heroism displayed by Mary during the trip to Liverpool and the melodramatic court scene in which her determination to have Jem Wilson's innocence proven, without exposing her father's guilt, is admirable and courageous.

Even if she may not originally have intended to, Elizabeth Gaskell makes women's issues central. While the title change from *John Barton* to *A Manchester Love Story* to *Mary Barton* happened at least partially in response to pressure from the publishers, the changes also signify Gaskell's progression of interest from general social ills to

more specific ones affecting the lives of women. Whether fiction was 'the vehicle for a plain and matter-of-fact exposition of social evils' was not a question to be settled during her day (Henry Fothergill Chorley, 1848:1050).

One of the positive values of omniscient narration in Gaskell's fiction is the opportunity it provides to use a range of characters as focalizers. In this way the reader is provided with the differing perspectives of women and men, as well as an understanding of the different pressures faced by members of the working class and of the middle class. John Barton's agony, for example, is known only to himself and the reader, and eventually deduced by Mary. There are instances in *Mary Barton*, however, where Gaskell's middle-class sympathies obtrude and obstruct the narrative flow. One such example is the frequently criticized moralizing which appears immediately after the very moving account of John Barton's loss of his only son through lack of nutrition as a result of his own unemployment. Gaskell is concerned to put forward the worker's point of view without appearing to share his (supposedly wrong) assumptions about the causes of his suffering. The workman's difficulty in understanding that the employer even during hard times appears unscathed is described. The contrast between rich and poor, according to the workman, is too great: why should he alone suffer from bad times? The passage describing John Barton's situation is preceded by the narrator's moralizing:

I know that this is not really the case; and I know what is the truth in such matters: but what I wish to impress is what the workman feels and thinks.... there are earnest men among these people, men who have endured wrongs without complaining, but without ever forgetting or forgiving those whom (they believe) have caused all this woe.

The parenthesized 'they believe' is significant in its effect of reinforcing the narrator's superior understanding of true causes. The actual passage describing John Barton's situation is moving in its simplicity and implicit empathy:

Among these was John Barton. His parents had suffered, his mother had died from absolute want of the necessaries of life. He himself was a good, steady workman, and, as such, pretty certain of steady employment. But he spent all he got with the confidence (you may also call it improvidence) of one who was willing, and believed himself able, to supply all his wants by his own exertions.

Such asides as, '(you may call it improvidence)', suggest that the narrator is appealing to readers from the class of the employers not to accuse her of partisanship.⁴ Gaskell may not be in a position fully to understand the complexity of economic cause and effect of which the suffering worker is the victim,⁵ yet her account is designed to obtain sympathy for John Barton as he struggles to save the life of his little son, recently recovered from scarlet fever, and to highlight the perspective the workers have of the rich:

... his life hung on a gossamer thread. Everything, the doctor said, depended on good nourishment, on generous living, to keep up the little fellow's strength ... Mocking words! when the commonest food in the house would not furnish one little meal. Barton tried credit; but it was worn out at the little provision shops, which were now suffering in their turn. He thought it would be no sin to steal, and would have stolen; but he could not get the opportunity in the few days the child lingered.

Hungry himself, almost to an animal pitch of ravenousness, but with the bodily pain swallowed up in anxiety for his little sinking lad, he stood at one of the shop windows where all edible luxuries are displayed; haunches of venison, Stilton cheeses, moulds of jelly - all appetising sights to the common passer by. And out of this shop came Mrs Hunter! She crossed to her carriage, followed by the shopman loaded with purchases for a party. The door was quickly slammed to, and she drove away; and Barton returned home with a bitter spirit of wrath in his heart, to see his only boy a corpse!

(1970:60-61)

The much criticized subsequent paragraph⁶ begins with an appeal to the reader and continues with an attribution of guilt to anonymous agitators who were clearly not culprits in this instance. The 'truth' of the situation, namely the patent injustice suffered, contains ample fuel for John Barton's subsequent bitterness. The controversial paragraph reads as follows:

You can fancy, now, the hoards of vengeance in his heart against the employers. For there are never wanting those who, either in speech or in print, find it their interest to cherish such feelings in the working classes; who know how and when to rouse the dangerous power at their command; and who use their knowledge with unrelenting purpose to either party.

(1970:61)

Pretending to understand on the part of the narrator actually harms the tale. Critics⁷ have been concerned to show the inconsistency in Gaskell as she fluctuates between empathizing utterly with a worker like John Barton on the one hand, and on the other, making haste to attribute his vengeance to agitators - a somewhat lame attempt to placate possible readers from the manufacturing class by explaining Barton's behaviour in such a way that would be acceptable to them. To

me it seems that she is attempting to be all things to all people - she is very careful not to have her narrator condemn the industrialists when events encourage the reader to do just this. It is perhaps another example where one should trust the tale rather than the teller. If one follows Wolfgang Iser's model of the meaning of the text being generated by the interplay of four perspectives - those of narrator, characters, plot and fictitious or implied reader⁸ - as actual reader one may wish to select the superior veracity of the plot over the narrator's moralizing at this point.

In the quotation from Gaskell's Preface cited above,⁹ in which she describes her motivation as novelist, she claims that it is not for her to judge whether indeed the worker is being unjustly treated by the master or not. This attempt to be 'fair' to both sides lands her in straits as novelist in the sense that her descriptive powers and evocation of the reader's sympathies are at war with her moralizing narrative interventions. One sees in such inconsistencies, I believe, Gaskell's attempt as novelist to deal with the very same issues facing Domestic Missionaries like Buckland and other Unitarians directly involved with the poor (Seed, 1982).

The narrator in this novel adopts a gently persuasive tone and is clearly attempting to win the reader - whether worker or industrialist - over to a more sympathetic view of the group to which she considers him/her likely to be innately antagonistic. She is attempting to offer relief to the poor

and 'dumb' working-class and to appeal to the 'masters' to be more understanding of and sympathetic towards their employees. She is hoping to help bridge the gap which divides these two groups which according to her are united by a strong bond of common interest and, mutually, deeply in need of each other. The masters' destruction removes the possibility of employment from the workers. The masters also thrive on the hard work and cooperation of the men.

In her attempt to build a bridge of understanding and compassion between worker and employer, the religious underpinnings of the narrator's stance emerge clearly and regularly. The kind of Christian world-view which permeates Gaskell's work is bound also to affect her narrative tone and style. The levelling by death of society's humble and grand is indicated in numerous ways. The devastation wreaked in the life of Mr Carson senior by the death of his son highlights the universal human vulnerability to bereavement.¹⁰ In *Ruth*, the spiritual focus is the central one. In the other novels, religion is frequently presented as the framework within which women (and men) place and judge themselves and one another.

While *Mary Barton* has been widely criticized¹¹ for moving from John to Mary Barton as chief focus, it yet has its own structural logic in terms of the telling of women's stories. Not only Mary's story is told but also Margaret's and Esther's. The novel begins and ends with the destiny of Esther:

For this novelist, the process of narration was based on a recognition of duality and the inevitability of conflicting interpretations: focalization through the naive perspective of a Mary Barton is always balanced against the very different standpoint of a jaded Aunt Esther. Point of view is determined through contestation in a Gaskell novel.

(D'Albertis, 1997:5)

As though to highlight the fate Mary fortunately escapes, and which her liaison with Harry Carson could have led her into, Esther's narration of her own story to Jem as narratee is strategically placed at the centre of the novel. The decline in her fortunes is from being the potential wife of a gentleman (and therefore in anticipation a 'lady') to becoming a prostitute. She acts from economic necessity in order to sustain life in her ailing daughter. Her motivation and misgivings are portrayed by Esther in graphic terms which denote her awareness throughout this process of her relationship with God and accountability to Him. Even Esther's telling Jem her story is in terms which take the after-life and the division into Hell and Heaven seriously. When mentioning the fact of her deceased child, she says:

'... I've done that since, which separates us as far asunder as heaven and hell can be.... My darling! my darling! even after death I may not see thee, my own sweet one! She was so good - like a little angel. What is that text, I don't remember, - that text mother used to teach me when I sat on her knee long ago, it begins, "Blessed are the pure" -
'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.'

(1970:211)

What needs emphasis here is the role of Christianity as offering consolation to those denied it during their earthly

existence. In this case Esther fears the consolation of meeting her daughter in heaven will be denied her as well. While Gaskell shows the ambivalence towards the promise of the after-life in the lives of dissatisfied working men,¹² for my purposes it is particularly the role of Christianity in the lives of women that requires attention.

The intersection between Gaskell's way of presenting Christianity as an active faith in the lives of her fictional characters and the demonstration of her awareness of women's issues reveals her perception of the significance of the spiritual life in the working out of their destiny by individual women characters. The paradox that in refusing Jem Mary comes to know her own heart and to realize that she loves him and wants to marry only him could appear, for instance, to prove Will Wilson's theory that women are fickle (1970:199).¹³ Instead, it is used by the narrator to provide the opportunity for Margaret to teach Mary about waiting with patience for what she wants. Mary needs to grow from the fantasy represented by her flirtation with Harry Carson, that she could live as a lady and her father as a gentleman, to recognising the long-standing intimacy between herself and Jem Wilson. Margaret teaches Mary the value of waiting on God rather than doing. The vindication of Margaret's patience is that the novel ends with her pending marriage to Will as well as the news received by Jem and Mary in Canada that Margaret's sight has been restored.¹⁴ Even without Margaret's advice,

however, '[m]aidenly modesty (and true love is ever modest) seemed to oppose every plan she [Mary] could think of for showing Jem how much she repented her decision against him, and how dearly she had now discovered that she loved him' (1970:177). Margaret reinforces Mary's decision by affirming that '[m]en are so queer, they like to have a' the courting to themselves' and advises her simply to wait: 'Waiting is far more difficult than doing ... but it's one of God's lessons we all must learn, one way or another' (1970:190).

The spiritual significance of being able to wait upon God is reinforced by Alice Wilson's penitence over the possibility that she may have set an example of impatience to Mary while waiting for her foster son Will:

'My dear! I shall never forgive myself, if my wicked words to-night are any stumbling-block in your path. See how the Lord has put coals of fire on my head! Oh! Mary, don't let my being an unbelieving Thomas weaken your faith. Wait patiently on the Lord, whatever your trouble may be.'

(1970:195)

With no self-consciousness about gender, Alice compares herself to 'an unbelieving Thomas' but the reader is aware that Mary's struggle related to waiting is strictly gender-related. 'Maidenly modesty' is at issue here. The taboo on women taking any kind of romantic initiative is apparent but Mary is seen to internalize this in spiritual terms. Again, one notices the significance particularly in Gaskell's early novels of the religious orientation of the central characters

and the way their femininity is self-defined in religious terms.

When it comes to Gaskell's presentation of Mary as heroine, there are a number of elements which suggest the relative immaturity of the novelist at this stage of her career in comparison to later depictions of women characters, most notably the trio in *Wives and Daughters*.¹⁵ The crisis Mary faces when Jem is on trial for a murder committed by her father puts both her powers and the narrator's to the test. Her realization that '[e]very thing rested on her' (1970:304) places the burden of responsibility as well as the narrative focus firmly on her. She grows in stature and worth as she puts 'feminine shame' aside and provides a full and honest answer to the 'pert young barrister' who dares 'so lightly to ask of her heart's secrets': 'I loved James Wilson, that's now on trial, above what tongue can tell - above all else on earth put together; and I love him now better than ever ...'. In her self-presentation she emphasizes the absence of her mother during her teenage years:

'... For, you see, sir, mother died before I was thirteen, before I could know right from wrong about some things; and I was giddy and vain, and ready to listen to any praise of my good looks; and this poor young Mr Carson fell in with me, and told me he loved me; and I was foolish enough to think he meant me marriage: a mother is a pitiful loss to a girl, sir; and so I used to fancy I could like to be a lady, and rich, and never know want any more....'

(1970:389-90)

It is as though this new position of Mary's challenges the narrative skills of Gaskell. The presentation of Mary during

the trial is not as coherent as one would like it to be. There are confused impressions of her - not least of all her own self-concept at this time. While she appears very lucid on the one hand, having resolved and clearly articulated her emotional stance in relation to Jem and the deceased Harry Carson, the strain of defending Jem without imputing guilt to her father overwhelms her. At the sight of Will Wilson, Jem's much sought after *alibi*, in the faith that he will take over the responsibility of getting Jem declared innocent, Mary's restraint crumbles, her strength gives way as she surrenders to a complete nervous collapse. She first speaks to herself in the following terms:

'I must not go mad. I must not, indeed. They say people tell the truth when they're mad; but I don't. I was always a liar. I was, indeed; but I'm not mad. I must not go mad. I must not, indeed.'

A few seconds later, on catching sight of Will, 'she shrieked aloud, "Oh, Jem! Jem! you're saved; and I am mad -" and was instantly seized with convulsions' (1970:394).

Gaskell fumbles as the omniscient narrator turns herself into a member of the community, a peripheral character of the type that successfully narrates the tale of *Cranford*. Having just shared intimate knowledge of Mr Carson's thought-life with regard to the heroine ('Old Mr Carson felt an additional beat at his heart at the thought of seeing the fatal Helen, the cause of all'), the narrator who earlier on confidently had even details of the afterlife at her fingertips now somewhat disingenuously claims that she had to rely on the

report of another for a true impression of her heroine's face at this point:

I was not there myself; but one who was told me that her look, and indeed her whole face, was more like the well-known engraving from Guido's picture of 'Beatrice Cenci' than anything else he could give me an idea of. He added, that her countenance haunted him, like the remembrance of some wild sad melody heard in childhood; that it would perpetually recur with its mute imploring agony.

(1970:388-9)

If Gaskell here has reasons for wishing to highlight the heroine's face particularly to show how she was perceived as 'other' by the community,¹⁶ surely she could have done so in a manner more consistent with her otherwise omniscient stance. These are the hesitations and inconsistencies that all but disappear in the later novels.

* * *

Ruth (1853) highlights Gaskell's interest in the peripheral woman, the woman who is not granted full status by society. With regard to the position of *Ruth* as Gaskell's second 'social problem novel' - although it ostensibly deals with an entirely different issue from the 'industrial' novels *Mary Barton* and *North and South* - there are some similar underlying concerns. In each instance, Gaskell is concerned with the position of women in society. In all her novels one can trace a correlation between Gaskell's depiction of women in their contexts in society and her view of what they were able to achieve and resist within the existing social framework. Even to unmarried mothers, a stigmatized group in Victorian times, she offers hope of redemption. She implicitly

appeals to her readers to make society a better place where such women can be accepted and helped to live constructively. Particularly in *Ruth* one sees how with the appropriate assistance women may emerge from their 'fallen' state to undertake constructive, even life-saving work in their communities. I do not therefore agree with Wright who, while setting himself up as Gaskell's modern-day champion, appears to be patronizing not only her but women in general with the following comment:

However forceful, ingenious, stoical, honourable women may be, their stories are reactive. Even if this is not so biologically, it was true socially and historically for Elizabeth Gaskell's age, and in some cases may still be so today.

(1995:10)

While apparently trying to give women their biological due, Wright appears to contradict himself. Unwanted pregnancies, or pregnancies occurring because of biological cause and effects not being understood (as in Ruth Hilton's case), are surely prime examples of men's decisions affecting women's lives, both biologically and in other ways. It is in this context that women are shown by Gaskell to take responsibility for their own lives.

While Gérin describes 'the deep religiosity of its tone as too emphatic for modern taste' (1976:130-31) and Shelston refers to the 'author's overt and often embarrassing religiosity' (1985:xix), I regard it as a seriously underestimated work in present-day readings of Gaskell. Shelston depicts Gaskell as being in the following

predicament: she wishes to win over the reader's sympathy for a girl in this 'fallen' condition but her own morality tells her that serious sin has occurred - she therefore overcompensates in her presentation.¹⁷ This criticism is valid if one treats the novel in realistic terms. If, on the other hand, one reads *Ruth* as a spiritual treatise offered by Gaskell as an aid to unmarried mothers and an appeal to society to treat women in this predicament more humanely, then in idealization *Ruth* becomes a spiritual symbol of what grace can achieve rather than an error in realist terms. *Ruth* focuses on the possibility of redemption and transformation for everyone - whether guilty, ignorant or innocent.

Gaskell's response to her readers' reactions shows her intense emotional involvement with the fate of 'Ruth', both *Ruth* the character and *Ruth* the novel itself. The acuteness of the pain Gaskell experienced with regard to this subject further suggests to me a lack of inner resolution on her part.

In her letter to Anne Robson, Gaskell provides a picture both of her determination to communicate on the subject of single motherhood and the range of attitudes available to society: just as change is presented as a possible (late) option for Mr Gradgrind in *Hard Times*, so Mr Bradshaw - after *Ruth's* funeral - also changes. He is presumably Gaskell's idea of the most unsympathetic reader she could encounter, and his change of heart would be what she would desire of such a reader. Her letter on the novel reads:

'An unfit subject for fiction' is the thing to say about it; I knew all this before; but I determined notwithstanding to speak my mind out about it; only how I shrink with more pain than I can tell you from what people are saying, though I wd do every jot of it over again to-morrow.

(January 1853; Chapple & Pollard, eds, 1966:220-21)

In her husband's congregation some members burned the book, illustrating the hardness of heart on the part of some of Gaskell's readers, and of course she was frowned upon as its author. She took comfort, though, that the topic was being discussed: 'from the very warmth with which people have discussed the tale I take heart of grace; it has made them talk and think a little on a subject which is so painful that it requires all one's bravery not to hide one's head like an ostrich and try by doing so to forget that the evil exists' (1991:203).

The omniscient perspective which Gaskell adopts in this novel has various advantages although it does not guarantee a perfectly consistent point of view. Coral Lansbury has explored 'the conflicting roles of the narrator to accommodate a middle-class reader'.¹⁸ Some of the inconsistencies this lands Gaskell in have been noted in the discussion of *Mary Barton*, for instance, where there are moments of distinct tension between the teller and the tale. In *Ruth* the narrative strategies are more subtle. Instead of pandering to her middle-class reader by offering facile explanations or justifications for either reasonable behaviour or ultimately inexplicable circumstances as she does in *Mary Barton*, she

chooses in her next novel *Ruth* a heroine who has been brought up to be a 'lady' (and therefore closer to a middle-class reader). She is vulnerable and defenseless by virtue of being an orphan rather than through her working-class position. Furthermore, in the presentation of her tale, typically Christian narrative strategies are employed when the characters perpetually use Scriptural verses to justify conduct. Gaskell clearly was steeped in Christian ideology but already her Unitarian background made her less than conventional. Her amusement at the foibles and follies to which characters resort in their use of Scripture is evident. The readers are challenged by seeing the unconventional uses to which Scriptural verses can be put. When Leonard, Ruth's illegitimate son, is due for a beating, Sally, the Bensons' housekeeper, intervenes by responding to Mr Benson's reminder of 'He that spareth the rod, spoileth the child' with the following:

'Ay, I remember, and I remember a bit more than you want me to remember, I reckon. It were King Solomon as spoke them words, and it were King Solomon's son that were King Rehoboam, and no great shakes either. I can remember what is said on him [and she cites chapter and verse]:

"And he" - that's King Rehoboam, the lad that tasted the rod - "did evil, because he prepared not his heart to seek the Lord." I've not been reading my chapters every night for fifty year to be caught napping by a Dissenter, neither!" said she triumphantly.

As Lansbury points out, '[i]n passages like these and in others referring to *Ruth*, Gaskell deliberately quotes scripture to confound those who based their conduct upon the authority of the Bible' (1984:31). The narrator is therefore

suggesting the complexity of issues which the non-critical may previously have assumed to be straightforwardly right or wrong.

Gaskell also uses the Bible to reinforce her purposes in other ways, as in the description of Jemima's pharisaism. Jemima is the eldest daughter of Mr Bradshaw to whose youngest daughters Ruth is governess, having posed as a widow on the advice of her Dissenting friends. Jemima is totally devoted to Ruth and is confronted with the greatest challenge yet to her particular brand of Christianity when she realises that her beloved Ruth is identical to the 'sinner' the milliner describes in her story of the profligate Ruth Hilton:

Two hours ago ... [Jemima] had never imagined that she should ever come in contact with anyone who had committed open sin; she had never shaped her conviction into words and sentences, but still it was there, that all the respectable, all the family and religious circumstances of her life, would hedge her in, and guard her from ever encountering the great shock of coming face to face with vice. Without being pharisaical in her estimation of herself, she had all a Pharisee's dread of publicans and sinners ...

(1991:323)

This is typical of Gaskell's narrative strategy in *Ruth* and far more sophisticated than the more direct interventions and efforts at twisting the narrator's comments to accommodate her readers that she makes in *Mary Barton*. In the same paragraph as the passage cited above Jemima's father, Mr Bradshaw, comes under direct attack. He is clearly typical of many wealthy Unitarians in the Manchester of Elizabeth Gaskell's day, the very same ones she complained would give money rather than

time and involvement to the poor. He is attacked for his hypocritical religious policies (he himself is guilty of bribery when it comes to getting his candidate elected, for instance) and their pernicious effect on innocent others such as his daughter:

Her father's often reiterated speeches had not been without their effect. He drew a clear line of partition, which separated mankind into two great groups, to one of which, by the grace of God, he and his belonged; while the other was composed of those whom it was his duty to try and reform ... with lectures, admonitions, and exhortations ... Jemima had rebelled against these hard doctrines of her father's, but their frequent repetition had had its effect, and led her to look upon those who had gone astray with shrinking, shuddering recoil, instead of with a pity, so Christ-like as to have both wisdom and tenderness in it.

(1991:323-4)

Jemima here is shown willy-nilly to be under her father's influence. Her 'shrinking, shuddering recoil' is contrasted to 'pity, ... wisdom and tenderness'. In such a passage Gaskell is challenging her readers with representations of true and false Christianity and presenting a woman in Ruth's position as a challenge to society to be compassionate rather than condemning. Gaskell had assisted a young woman called Pasley (like Ruth, an orphan seduced at a tender age),¹⁹ and clearly felt very strongly about 'the sexual vulnerability of young girls' (Shelston, 1985:viii)²⁰ and society's duty to support rather than condemn.

A lucid summary of the societal attitudes prevailing against women in Ruth's category is provided by Langland:

In the Victorian era, conceptions of a woman's sexuality were tied to ideas of her moral nature and were most

fully articulated within the framework of the fallen woman and the prostitute. The patriarchal ideology that professes to explain the social event of a woman's fall has recourse to woman's nature rather than her nurture. The fallen woman, then, is a daughter of Eve, innately corrupt. This ideological construction was so powerful that 'fallen' girls of nine or ten (whom we would now recognise as innocent victims of child abuse) could be comprehended within it....

Looking back on the Victorian era, we find evidence that many young women were victims of social circumstances. They needed economic aid more than they needed moral rescue. Their prostitution testified more to economic necessity and social vulnerability - a woman's powerless position within patriarchy - than it did to moral perversion.

(1989:27)

Langland then proceeds to cite Charlotte Brontë's presentation of Bertha Mason as stemming from the pervasive Victorian 'fear that morally corrupt tendencies in women might suddenly mushroom into gigantic uncontrolled indulgences'. Indeed, there could be no greater contrast than between the presentation of the bestiality of Bertha Mason by *Jane Eyre* and the narrator's presentation of the spiritual refinement of Ruth, nor in the treatment they receive by society. In the case of Bertha Mason, it is ironically her husband, supposedly her protector and defender, who keeps her in solitary confinement. In the case of Ruth Hilton, total strangers take her in and love her as their own flesh and blood. Where Brontë's form of narration in *Jane Eyre* has the effect of reinforcing societal attitudes towards the sexually deprived woman as outcast, the tactics of the omniscient narrator in *Ruth* consistently challenge societal stereotypes and hint at the possibility of positive consequences.

Two questions in particular do not seem to be resolved by the narrator. One is the question of Ruth's guilt with regard to her sexual 'fall'. The second is the rightness or wrongness of the deceit used by Ruth and the Bensons as she takes on the persona of the widow Mrs Denbigh. Ruth's sexual awakening and its concomitant (im-?)moral choices have raised critical questions:

... if sex has seemed natural to Ruth, is female desire itself then 'innocent'?

Gaskell clearly does and does not believe this.
(Uglow, 1993:325)

Ruth is an interesting example of the substitution of spiritual for sexual desire. Uglow explores the question in some depth. Ruth clearly enjoys sexual fulfilment with Bellingham and it is only after being struck 'a great blow on the face' by a child for being 'not a lady ... [but] a bad naughty girl' (1991:71) that she views her situation in the light of guilt. Even at this point it is the realization of 'the estimation in which she was henceforward to be held' (1991:73) that grieves her rather than a sense of alienation from God. In other words, in terms of her own sense of self and sense of God she has not done wrong. Throughout the novel Ruth's naivety is presented by the narrator as a cover for her almost unconscious 'fall' into sexual sin. As with Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles, some readers will always object to the presentation of Ruth as a 'pure woman'.

One of the distinct advantages of the use of the omniscient perspective is that the reader is given insight

into Bellingham's thought-life so that from the outset we are aware of his unsuitability as a partner for Ruth. As reader one is thus informed in a way which makes one see Ruth as potential victim even when she has no idea that Bellingham has any particular interest in her. One is also prepared for the later influence of his domineering mother:

She [his mother] was anxious for him to marry Miss Duncombe. He cared little or nothing about it - it was time enough to be married ten years hence; and so he was dawdling through some months of his life - sometimes flirting with the nothing-loath Miss Duncombe, sometimes plaguing, and sometimes delighting his mother, at all times taking care to please himself - when he first saw Ruth Hilton...

Even the heartless Mrs Mason - when annoyed with Ruth - is 'struck afresh with the remarkable beauty which Ruth possessed; ... her waving outline of figure, her striking face, with dark eyebrows and dark lashes, combined with auburn hair and a fair complexion' (1991:11). The vagueness of the phrase 'her waving outline of figure' contrasts with the details given of her face. And this pattern (where the face is emphasized and the figure glossed over) occurs throughout the novel, suggesting Gaskell's reticence on the physical plane. Gaskell despite her social critique is clearly still a product of her time. The female body except for the beauty of Ruth's face is largely overlooked.

The first interchange between Ruth and Bellingham enables the reader to hone in on his perspective. When he first meets her as an apprentice dressmaker to Mrs Mason she is fixing the gown of his partner at the ball. The interaction between the

three of them is described as follows:

By way of showing a pretty childlike impatience, she [Miss Duncombe, Bellingham's partner] began to beat time with her feet to the spirited air the band was playing. Ruth could not darn the rent in her dress with this continual motion, and she looked up to remonstrate. As she threw her head back for this purpose, she caught the eye of the gentleman who was standing by; it was so expressive of amusement at the airs and graces of his pretty partner, that Ruth was infected by the feeling, and had to bend her face down to conceal the smile that mantled there. But not before he had seen it, and not before his attention had been thereby drawn to consider the kneeling figure, that, habited in black up to the throat, with the noble head bent down to the occupation in which she was engaged, formed such a contrast to the flippant, bright, artificial girl who sat to be served with an air as haughty as a queen on her throne.

(1991:15)

The unpremeditated nature of their encounter, the spontaneity of their contact, is conveyed by the narrator in fairly sympathetic terms. But once Bellingham's interest is roused, his pursuit of Ruth is shown to be as purposeful as it is passionate. In the indolence and indifference characterizing his life, Bellingham's response to Ruth is described as 'a new passionate hearty feeling [which] shot through his whole being':

He did not know why he was so fascinated by her. She was very beautiful, but he had seen others equally beautiful, and with many more *agaceries* calculated to set off the effect of their charms.

There was, perhaps, something bewitching in the union of the grace and loveliness of womanhood with the naivete, simplicity, and innocence of an intelligent child. There was a spell in the shyness, which made her avoid and shun all admiring approaches to acquaintance. It would be an exquisite delight to attract and tame her wildness, just as he had often allured and tamed the timid fawns in his mother's park.

By no over-bold admiration, or rash, passionate words, would he startle her; and, surely, in time she might be induced to look upon him as a friend, if not something

nearer and dearer still.

(1991:33)

The narrator makes no secret - to the reader - of Bellingham's machinations. His fascination with Ruth is genuine, as is his viewing of her as object rather than subject. The comparison he makes between her and 'the timid fawns in his mother's park' is communicated in order to alert the reader to the danger Ruth is in. Bellingham is used as focalizer here and his scheming anticipation of capturing Ruth is presented in a detailed and revealing way. There is a distinct tension between the narrator's perspective of Ruth as potential victim and Bellingham's of Ruth, as potential 'friend, if not something nearer and dearer still'. What is significant here is that Bellingham is shown not to set out deliberately to harm Ruth. His admiration of her is genuine, his liking and desiring of her intense, but what the narrator has revealed to the reader is that his disposition and character are such that he can only do her harm. This is where the use of omniscient narration creates possibilities that do not exist in first-person narration, as the tension between focalizer and narrator allows space for the reader to make judgments at odds with a character's self-perception or thoughts.

It is emphasized throughout the novel that Bellingham reveals a blunt insensitivity as to who Ruth really is. The reader is made aware that he sees her as an object of passion. He consistently admires her beautiful face but dresses her in lilies as though she is his doll: 'She was quite still while

he arranged her coronet, looking up in his face with loving eyes.... She knew that he was pleased from his manner, which had the joyousness of a child playing with a new toy...'

(1991:74). Later too, towards the end of the novel, when Ruth nurses him as saint and martyr and herself falls prey to the fever, all he can say when he comes to is, mawkishly: 'Where are the water-lilies? Where are the lilies in her hair?'

(1991:446). This imagery reminds us that all Bellingham has ever wanted from Ruth or appreciated in her was to be an object of beauty to satisfy the whims of the moment.

The romantic scene in Wales, in which Bellingham indulges his whims, is ironically the last positive interaction they have before he falls ill and is removed from Ruth by his mother's willpower and his own lack of it. The narrator highlights and by implication condemns his own passivity, his lack of loyalty towards Ruth, and his willingness to let his strong-willed mother take over. Again, the omniscient perspective provides the occasion for the narrator to judge critically the motivation of the focalizer. There is a perpetual clash between the perspective of the omniscient narrator and Bellingham's. The narrator uses many different tactics to indicate that Ruth is spiritually alive, guarded and protected by God - despite her susceptibility to Bellingham. Here the narrator's own endorsement of the Christian faith is revealed.

It is significant that after meeting Ruth at her old

home, falling as it were into the clutches of Bellingham, the 'poor old labourer prayed long and earnestly that night for Ruth': 'He called it "wrestling for her soul"; and I think his prayers were heard, for "God judgeth not as man judgeth"' (1991:51). What is pertinent to my purposes here is the narrator's endorsement of the labourer's prayers and willingness to align her own point of view with God's. The suggestion is that despite Ruth's seduction by Bellingham, her subsequent pregnancy and abandonment by him, her 'soul' is not lost; she is still provided for by God. The narrator thus embraces the Christian faith in essence. It is the details of doctrinal differences that she exposes and at times satirizes.

After receiving the self-righteous and condemning letter from Bellingham's mother and realizing that she has been abandoned by Bellingham, Ruth wishes - like Elijah²¹ - that God would take her life: 'Surely life was a horrible dream, and God would mercifully awaken her from it. She had no penitence, no consciousness of error or offence; no knowledge of any one circumstance but that he was gone' (1991:94). What is important here is the portrayal of Ruth's consciousness. Ruth here is the focalizer, and she is presented as experiencing no guilt in relation to her 'fall into sexual sin'. Instead, she is consumed by a sense of loss of the one she loved, denoting her emotional involvement with Bellingham at this stage, rather than a sense of the sexual transgression she is later ostracized for.

There is an unresolved element in the presentation of Ruth's fluctuating awareness of wrongdoing - first, a child's slap and insult plunge her into a pit of guilt and self-condemnation (1991:71-72) but then again she is seen to have forfeited any sense of guilt. In her state of anguish and despair on the departure of her lover, she is found by the Reverend Benson himself. The suggestion is that the old labourer's prayer²² is answered by the appearance of Benson on the scene of Ruth's life.

There is a very clear distinction between the generous and compassionate attitude of the narrator towards Ruth, and the self-righteous condemnatory tone of Mrs Bellingham. The latter's note to Ruth contrasts forcibly with the gentle spirit of the Reverend Benson, whose approach most closely mirrors that of the narrator. Mrs Bellingham's insensitive and blaming attitude reveals the typical double standards of the day in which men were exonerated from sexual guilt and women deemed instead both vicious and responsible. After encouraging her son to abandon his mistress, she writes to Ruth:

... I wish to exhort you to repentance, and to remind you that you will not have your own guilt alone upon your head, but that of any young man whom you may succeed in entrapping into vice. I shall pray that you may turn to an honest life, and I strongly recommend you, if indeed you are not 'dead in trespasses and sins,' to enter some penitentiary.

(1991:92)

The narrator having made the reader thoroughly aware of the circumstances of Ruth's seduction and powerlessness in this way highlights the irony of the mother's callous

positionality. She sides entirely with the 'young man ... entrap[ped] into vice' and completely ignores even the possibility of Ruth being the victim of the wiles of her far more sophisticated son.

Ruth's first glimpse of the Reverend Benson and her reaction is presented in stark contrast to Bellingham's dismissive and class-based attitude:

She was struck ... with the mild beauty of the face, ... something of a quick spiritual light in the deep set eyes, a sensibility about the mouth ... altogether, though a peculiar, it was a most attractive face....

'Did you see his face, sir?' asked Ruth.

'No; but a man's back - his *tout ensemble* has character enough in it to decide his rank.'

'His face was very singular; quite beautiful!' said she, softly; but the subject did not interest Mr Bellingham, and he let it drop.

(1991:68-70)

After her abandonment by Bellingham, the interaction between Thurstan Benson and Ruth is described as follows: 'There was some look of heavenly pity in his eyes, as gravely and sadly they met her upturned gaze, which touched her stony heart' (1991:96). Benson's tenderness and care bring new life to Ruth's emotional being, numbed by the pain of her abandonment by Bellingham. There is an implicit contrast between the divine compassion in Benson's gaze and the way Bellingham regards her - as an object more or less suited to fulfil his needs and desires at any particular time. The narration here emphasizes the spiritual nature of the connection between Ruth and Benson, and Bellingham's incapacity to see beyond the purely physical, and questions of 'rank'.

It is also Benson's cry of pain which prevents Ruth's suicide by drowning. Instead, to help him recover from his faint she fetches water from 'the little mountain stream, the dashing sound of whose waters had been tempting her, but a moment before, to seek forgetfulness in the deep pool into which they fell' (1991:97). Where Bellingham for so long had been the embodiment of all that was of any significance to Ruth, Benson's cry of pain 'called her out of herself: The tender nature was in her still, in that hour when all good angels seemed to have abandoned her.' The phrase 'when all good angels seemed to have abandoned her' belongs to the narrator and simultaneously suggests Ruth's own sense of desolation.

There are two possible lines of thought regarding the ending of *Ruth*. On the one hand, there clearly is a divide in Elizabeth Gaskell between wanting to exempt Ruth from blame, and a wish to reflect her society's attitudes, which is reflected in the narrative structuring:

... although Victorians could distinguish among degrees of fallen women, it rigidly maintained the moral chasm that separated the fallen from the pure. The rise of penitentiaries in the 1840s ... stems from the belief in an innately corrupt female nature because these penitentiaries emphasised a long process requisite for spiritual purging and purification.

(Langland, 1989:27)

Ruth's martyr-like end where she dies after nursing not only ailing members of the community but even her erstwhile seducer suffering from the plague suggests that Elizabeth Gaskell herself felt the need to put Ruth through a process of

suffering and transformation.²³ The radical contradiction in Gaskell herself between viewing Ruth as a spiritually 'pure' woman, on the one hand, or on the other, as having stumbled into serious sexual sin - even if 'innocently' (with all the paradox this implies) - is epitomized by Gaskell's tenacity in opting for death as the most appropriate ending to the novel.

However, when one considers that to Ruth, God had in fact become the most significant being (besides her son Leonard), death is after all the most appropriate ending to the novel - Charlotte Brontë's objections notwithstanding. Death constitutes for Ruth the final consummation with her Beloved Other. The narrator has frequently suggested Ruth's closeness to God. In her conversation with Benson on her nursing those dying from the fever, she expresses concern over the possibility of her son Leonard losing her and yet overcomes it: "I will not be afraid," she replied, lifting up her face, over which a bright light shone, as of God's radiance. "I am not afraid for myself. I will not be so for my darling" (1991:426). The implied promise of God's presence with her contained in this description is realized on her deathbed:

They stood around her bedside, not speaking, or sighing, or moaning; they were too much awed by the exquisite peacefulness of her look for that. Suddenly she opened wide her eyes, and gazed intently forwards, as if she saw some happy vision, which called out a lovely, rapturous, breathless smile. They held their very breaths.

'I see the Light coming,' said she. 'The Light is coming,' she said. And, raising herself slowly, she stretched out her arms, and then fell back, very still for evermore.

(1991:448)

The narrator presents Bellingham's offer of marriage as an

inadequate option for Ruth. In a very Christlike way, and in a very Christlike capacity, Ruth offers her life instead; in fact, lays it down voluntarily.

Gaskell presents Ruth's death as martyr, after having nursed Bellingham back to health, as the culmination of her victory in the moral combat she has been engaged in as unmarried mother. She has been shown to refuse Bellingham's offer of marriage proudly and without hesitation. His demerits are so overwhelming in her eyes that they provide the final rationale for her refusal. She enters death as the consummation of her relationship with her Heavenly Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. Ruth's way of dying is shown to epitomize for her loved ones who remain behind the spiritual reality described in II Corinthians 3:18: 'And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another ...'

Ruth is the female *Bildungsroman* par excellence. The central character develops from the lowest point as defined in societal terms - that of 'fallen' woman - to being unofficially canonized by the community.²⁴ As already stressed, the omniscient perspective in *Ruth* provides the reader with the opportunity to gain insight into others' perceptions of Ruth. Towards the end of the novel, with Leonard, her son, we overhear a controversial conversation about Ruth outside the hospital where she has nursed many of the most poor and distressed suffering from a highly contagious illness. In a

debate over Ruth between two people, one claiming that Ruth's work among the sick is 'her penance' ('They say she has been a great sinner'...), the other replies:

'Such a one as her has never been a great sinner; nor does she do her work as a penance, but for the love of God, and of the blessed Jesus. She will be in the light of God's countenance when you and I will be standing afar off. I tell you, man, when my poor wench died, as no one would come near, her head lay at that hour on this woman's sweet breast. I could fell you,' the old man went one, lifting his shaking arm, 'for calling that woman a great sinner. The blessing of them who were ready to perish is upon her.'

(1991:429)

Ruth is acknowledged as saint by the community she leaves behind, even by Mr Bradshaw whose relenting attitude was surely intended (as suggested above) to serve as model for the most judgmental reader.²⁵ Gaskell's plea to her readership to view the plight of the 'fallen woman' with compassion is unequivocal and consistent. Gaskell's idealization of Ruth was perhaps a necessary safeguard to shield herself from accusations of sexual permissiveness.

* * *

All three 'social-problem' novels present female heroines who play different but comparable roles in winning over the middle-class reader's sympathies. To arouse in the reader greater compassion for the working class was part of Gaskell's intention. In *Mary Barton* the change in focus from John Barton to his daughter does not entirely detract from this goal. In *Ruth* Gaskell uses the very religion her middle-class readers espoused to condemn sinners to show how the very worst sinner

in their eyes may be transformed to perfect saint with loving kindness and a good example. *North and South* shows the heroine undergoing a very interesting development from naive Southerner, to worker-sympathizer, then mediator between rich and poor, and finally, industrialist wife. Margaret too has not been made to 'dwindle' into being a wife²⁶ but instead is placed in a marriage requiring all her forces of character to be exercised and displayed. The narrator clearly implies that Margaret's influence on master-men relations and sympathy with the workers will continue to be a powerful force.

* * *

The ways in which the complex stories in *Wives and Daughters* are told and interwoven suggest that Gaskell's manipulation of plot is a narrative strategy which reveals the intricacies of family life and exposes, among other things, the inadequacy of education for girls at the time. *Wives and Daughters* is a larger and more ambitious project than any of Gaskell's other works,²⁷ and both looks back to Jane Austen in terms of its narrative control and also forward to George Eliot with respect to the large sweep of events it encompasses. The title itself suggests largeness of scope. Its success derives - at least in part - from the greater distancing between the omniscient narrator and her material.²⁸

If *North and South* was the novel depicting powerful women,²⁹ then *Wives and Daughters*, despite its morally upright heroine, exposes feminine wiles in their least attractive

guise. As in *Shirley*, *Wives and Daughters* has more than a single major female character. Whereas Shirley and Caroline are both admirable in many respects, Cynthia Kirkpatrick, however attractive, is not to be trusted - certainly not by men. She is in some ways the counterpart of Ginevra Fanshawe in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, though of course more fully fleshed out and far more winsome. Molly Gibson, the heroine, is disarmingly straightforward, uncalculating and constant and thus forms a significant contrast to both her pretty stepsister and less intelligent, manipulative stepmother. The charm of both Cynthia Kirkpatrick and her mother is contrasted with the superior moral standards of Molly. While Gaskell is also making points about morality in this novel, it is done less obtrusively than in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*. Because of her greater narrative control, and her ability to sustain the dispassionate global perspective adopted in this novel, Gaskell's didacticism is implicit rather than explicit and more fully incorporated in the presentation of material.

Narration is used as strategy in this novel to present two issues of central significance to the Victorian understanding of women's position in society, namely, the kind of education made available to girls and their consequent ability to make informed and wise choices regarding marriage. The character development encouraged by their education clearly influences the kind of wives they become. The quality of marital relationship they are capable of is at least in part a result of the upbringing they have had.

The introduction of Molly Gibson in the opening paragraph of the novel is done in suggestive terms. The narrator is gently satirizing novel-writing conventions:

To begin with the old rigmarole of childhood. In a country there was a shire, and in that shire there was a town, and in that town there was a house, and in that house there was a room, and in that room there was a bed, and in that bed there lay a little girl; wide awake and longing to get up, but not daring to do so for fear of the unseen power in the next room - a certain Betty ...

(1983:35)

This introduction suggests great confidence on the part of the narrator, both in her own storytelling skills and in the value she projects onto her heroine. Molly is introduced as treasure carefully concealed in a casket.³⁰

Molly Gibson is presented in unconventional terms. Like Jane Eyre, she is not particularly pretty - at least at first. Her personality, to begin with, is also presented as less than perfectly gracious and charming. She is direct, at times confrontational, but always sincere.

The first encounter between Molly and Roger is almost as inauspicious as that (non-encounter) between Darcy and Elizabeth:

To Molly, who was not finely discriminate in her glances at the stranger this first night, he simply appeared 'heavy-looking, clumsy', and 'a person she was sure she should never get on with'. He certainly did not seem to care much what impression he made upon his mother's visitor. He was at that age when young men admire a formed beauty more than a face with any amount of future capability of loveliness, and when they are morbidly conscious of the difficulty of finding subjects of conversation in talking to girls in a state of feminine hobbledehoyhood.... He only looked upon Molly as a badly-dressed, and rather awkward girl, with black hair and an intelligent face, who might help him in the task he had set himself of keeping up a bright general conversation

during the rest of the evening; might help him - if she would, but she would not.

(1983:119)

Molly's simple and negative thoughts are placed in quotation marks whereas the narrator's comments are the most sophisticated. The latter teasingly hints at Roger's state of being 'morbidly conscious of the difficulty of finding subjects of conversation in talking to girls in a state of feminine hobbledehoyhood'. When Roger is used as focalizer, his thoughts of Molly are also negative ('a badly-dressed, and rather awkward girl') and indicate irritation ('who might help him ... - if she would, but she would not'). Molly's rather strong will, at times, appears like obstinacy to those with whom she does not wish to cooperate - be it Roger in this instance, or her stepmother in others. In fact, it shows her to have a mind of her own and a preparedness to offend sooner than compromise principles dear to her. The narrator's presentation of her is not unlike that of Margaret Hale in this respect. Molly's 'awkward'-ness is also foregrounded as a way of distinguishing her from the conventionally super-graceful heroine - a mould Cynthia fits into very well. Of course, Molly is only sixteen when she is first introduced by the narrator and she is gradually shown to acquire any social graces she may have been seen to lack.

The way Cynthia and Molly are portrayed allows the narrator to stress not only their innate character differences but also the effect of differences in education. Molly's formal education is limited because of her father's

reservations about women needing formal education at all. Mr Gibson's attitude³¹ to his daughter's education is clearly representative of the commonly prevailing contemporary attitude to education for girls and is reflected in his admonitions to her governess Miss Eyre:³²

'... Don't teach Molly too much; she must sew, and read, and write, and do her sums; but I want to keep her a child, and if I find more learning desirable for her, I'll see about giving it to her myself. After all, I'm not sure that reading or writing is necessary. Many a good woman gets married with only a cross instead of her name; it's rather a diluting of mother-wit, to my fancy; but, however, we must yield to the prejudices of society, Miss Eyre, and so you may teach the child to read.'

(1983:65)

Mr Gibson's conversation reads like a caricature, and the reader senses the tongue-in-cheek aspect of the narration at this point. It emerges further in the description of Miss Eyre's attempt to oblige Mr Gibson: 'She taught Molly to read and write, but tried honestly to keep her back in every other branch of education'. However, Molly insists on broadening her educational horizons herself:

It was only by fighting and struggling hard, that bit by bit Molly persuaded her father to let her have French and drawing lessons. He was always afraid of her becoming too much educated, though he need not have been alarmed; the masters who visited such small country towns as Hollingford forty years ago, were not such great proficients in their arts. ... being daunted by her father in every intellectual attempt, she read every book that came in her way, almost with as much delight as if it had been forbidden. For his station in life, Mr Gibson had an unusually good library ...

(1983:65)

Thanks to her diligent governess Miss Eyre and to her own perseverance and determination, she gets more instruction than her father bargained for. Furthermore, through her friendship

with Roger, the budding scientist, her interest in natural history is stimulated.

While the shaping of Molly is influenced by her visits to Hamley Hall, her few days' stay at the Towers also affects her polish. Roger first notices her as an attractive young woman in her own right at the Towers.³³ She is consequently able to have an intelligent conversation with Lord Hollingford - who is shy and reserved and does not easily or readily communicate with young women. Her mind has been so broadened by the reading she has done under the tutelage of Roger that Lord Hollingford is able to say of her:

'What a charming little lady that daughter of yours is! Most girls of her age are so difficult to talk to; but she is intelligent and full of interest in all sorts of sensible things; well read, too - she was up in *Le Règne Animal* - and very pretty!'

Mr Gibson bowed, much pleased at such a compliment from such a man, were he lord or not. It is very likely that if Molly had been a stupid listener, Lord Hollingford would not have discovered her beauty; or the converse might be asserted - if she had not been young and pretty, he would not have exerted himself to talk on scientific subjects in a manner which she could understand.

(1983:339)

The narrator's point here is subtly made. She is highlighting in her heroine the rare combination of 'beauty and brains'.

Wryly, she reflects that, 'if Molly had been a stupid listener, Lord Hollingford would not have discovered her beauty'. The more prevalent societal view is subsequently presented with a touch of irony as 'the converse'. Lord Hollingford, however scholarly and however socially inept he may be, however impressed by Molly's learning, is nevertheless

equally struck by Molly's being 'young and pretty'. Which realization came first to Lord Hollingford the narrator declines to make explicit. She hereby simply illuminates ironically the ways of the world.

Gaskell thus complies with convention to the extent that though Molly started off plain, gauche, awkward and somewhat ungroomed, thanks to the ministrations of her Frenchified stepsister, in the later stages of the novel she has acquired sufficient social grace to be described as pretty. Cynthia's pointed comment to Molly on the subject is worth noting. When Molly exclaims, 'I should like to be pretty!' Cynthia's response is depicted as follows:

'Why Molly,' said Cynthia, turning round with an exclamation on the tip of her tongue; but when she caught the innocent, wistful look on Molly's face, she instinctively checked what she was going to say, and, half-smiling to her own reflection in the glass, she said - 'The French girls would tell you, to believe that you were pretty would make you so.'

(1983:320)

Furthermore, Osborne, the more artistic and worldly of the Hamley brothers, early on spotted Molly's promise of delicate beauty. While one could thus regard Gaskell as making a feminist point similar to Charlotte Brontë's when she deliberately chooses a 'plain' heroine in *Jane Eyre*, Gaskell does not sustain it in the same way. She is in this way less radical in her position with regard to physical appearance than Brontë. In certain other respects, most notably when dealing with financial independence, she is equally so. Margaret Hale takes pride in her financial independence, as do

Jane Eyre and Shirley.³⁴

The way the education of both Molly and Cynthia is presented as well as the critiques of the kind of education Mrs Gibson provided for her pupils is one among the many complex strands of narration in this novel. The girls' education of necessity affects their decision-making powers, their standards of morality, and consequently their choice of a husband, as well as their motivation for the choice. In the case of Cynthia, her reasons both for accepting and eventually rejecting Roger are revealing. She likes to be admired; she wishes to escape from the grasp of Mr Preston. But when she rejects Roger, it is because she would not like to have to defer to the moral highground she recognizes him as inhabiting (1983:601-2).

The type of education Mrs Gibson provides reflects not only on her own character but also on the quality of education made available to girls at the time. Perhaps the most complex portrait in the novel is of Mrs Gibson herself.³⁵ It seems to me that the way Mrs Gibson is presented is as consistently self-centred, resulting from her basic selfishness coupled with the result of years of struggle, culminating in a sense of the need to protect herself. The focalization in this novel as frequently hinges on Mrs Gibson as on Molly, thus acquainting the reader intimately with her thinking processes, her mode of reasoning, and her feelings. Her self-absorption is striking. She thinks of and understands everything only in terms of how it affects her. When finally her daughter is

happily and wealthily married, she envies her. She interprets Roger Hamley's farewell greeting to his beloved Molly as bestowed solely upon her. She wishes for the death of the young Osborne Hamley. She is prejudiced against Aimée Hamley without ever having met her. While she is pretty and pleasant and has obliging, winning ways, especially when she is with those more genteel than herself, her commitment to truth is questionable as is illustrated in the small deceits she practises. She conforms admirably to societal stereotypes for women but is a moral disappointment both to her husband and her stepdaughter. Her own daughter is neglected and consequently bitter and cynical. The narrative strategies used in the presentation of Mrs Gibson are intended to reveal that the societal standards for women's behaviour are superficial and morally inadequate. Suggestive chapter titles like 'A Mother's Manoeuvre' and 'A Passive Coquette' suggest the narrator's line on Mrs Gibson and Cynthia respectively.

Mrs Gibson's manipulativeness and scheming are thus exposed and condemned. Society is seen to reinforce this by expecting women to be decorative, pleasant and well-mannered rather than well read and sensible. Where society often encourages women to resort to underhand tactics, Molly is disarmingly frank and direct, as is Lady Harriet, her 'champion', who has the following to say of Mrs Gibson ('Clare'):

'She's not very wise, certainly; but she's so useful and agreeable, and has such pleasant manners, I should have thought any one who wasn't particular about education

would have been charmed to keep her as a governess.'
(1983:124)

This comment not only reflects on Mrs Gibson but also on the values governing female education at the time. In *Wives and Daughters* the narration of a range of views on women's education is explored, particularly in terms of how these affect the presentation of the complex dynamics surrounding the subject of marriage. It is not accidental that Mrs Gibson was formerly a particular type of governess.³⁶

The Gibsons' marriage is presented provocatively.³⁷ The narrator's stance is comparable to the one depicting the Bennets' marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* with more sympathy towards the male party than the female. The complex nature of Mr Gibson's fidelity to both his wife and Molly, his disappointment at the character of his wife, along with his sense of Molly's benefitting from a woman's influence, all combine to constitute a bitter-sweet tone of nostalgia for the lost intimacy with his daughter, near-regret at the step he took, and a sense of propriety that perhaps it was after all the correct step and that living with the consequences is the only proper thing to do to.

Her manipulative, scheming attitude is evident from her view of marriage, which she sees as providing her with economic means and social status:

'... I wonder if I am to go on all my life toiling and moiling for money? It's not natural. Marriage is the natural thing; then the husband has all that kind of dirty work to do, and his wife sits in the drawing-room like a lady.'

(1983:131)

And:

She was ... thinking how pleasant it would be to have a husband once more; - some one who would work while she sate at her elegant ease in a prettily furnished drawing-room; and she was rapidly investing this imaginary breadwinner with the form and features of the country surgeon ...

(1983:138)

Mrs Gibson is a complex example of the suberfuge society implicity encourages in women. Her pleasant exterior masks motives which are less than laudable.³⁸ Her motives for marrying are mercenary, and while this may be explained by the hardships she suffered as widow, governess and teacher, the style of narration is merciless in consistently exposing rather than condoning her.

Immediately after his proposal the narrator depicts Mr Gibson's ambivalent thoughts as follows: 'There! he had done it - whether it was wise or foolish - he had done it! but he was aware that the question as to its wisdom came into his mind the instant that the words were said past recall'. By employing Mr Gibson himself as focalizer the narrator has given the reader sharp insight into his state of mind, which borders on regret. Mrs Gibson's economic focus has already been made clear and is reinforced in her response to his proposal:

She hid her face in her hands.

'Oh! Mr Gibson,' she said; and then, a little to his surprise, and a great deal to her own, she burst into hysterical tears: it was such a wonderful relief to feel that she need not struggle any more for a livelihood.

(1983:140)

Mrs Gibson's 'burst[ing] into hysterical tears' is explained

bathetically by her not having to 'struggle any more for a livelihood'. The narrator here clearly differentiates between the apparently touching scene and its real motivation, showing the economic rather than the romantic cause of the tears and relief. The marriage itself, as may be expected from the narrator's revelation of Mrs Gibson's motives, is less than satisfactory to Gibson. Not unlike Jane Austen, particularly in her presentation of Charlotte Lucas's decision to marry Collins, Gaskell shows herself conscious of the economic factors frequently influencing women in their choice of marriage partner. While she may sympathize with the economic hardships single women frequently endure, she is not uncritical of the implications for love and commitment of mercenary motives.

The presentation of Molly's reaction to her father's impending marriage somewhat belies one of Gaskell's early admirers' comments that '[a]ll through the story Molly Gibson moves as an angel'.³⁹ She now suspects her father's motives for sending her on an extended visit to the Hamleys, although in point of fact his immediate reason was simply to get her out of the reach of the amorous apprentice Mr Coxe. Molly, however, is shown to feel betrayed and bitter: "So I was sent out of the house that all this might be quietly arranged in my absence?" Out of the bitterness of her heart she spoke' (1983:146). In her grief at her father's decision the narrator depicts Molly's recognition that their close and exclusive bond is forever affected. It is questionable whether such loss

could ever be adequately compensated for by the presence of the kind of stepmother Mrs Gibson would prove to be. Molly's grief is at the assault on her loving image of each of them, father and daughter, being bound by a chain 'like Ponto's [her pony]', portrayed before her father's decision to remarry:

'... and then I could fasten us two to each end of it, and when I wanted you I could pull, and if you didn't want to come, you could pull back again; but I should know you knew I wanted you, and we could never lose each other...'

(1983:58)

That Molly receives the news of her father's decision to marry at Hamley Hall and is found sobbing with grief by Roger is clearly no coincidence but a narrative contrivance of symbolic import, preparing the reader subconsciously for Roger's eventual position in Molly's life. Molly, often socially gauche and awkward, is upright and direct and morally superior to both Mrs Gibson and Cynthia. In terms of the plot, she is rewarded by her marriage to Roger Hamley, by now a respected scientist and also the hero of the novel. Critics have viewed Molly's marriage to Roger as an endorsement of patriarchy as she moves directly from being in the care of her father to the arms of another strong man. I do not agree. She has been stepmothered in quite a negative sense, and has also developed a certain independence of heart and mind. I do agree that this has been partly through the influence of Roger but do not agree that this makes her achievement any less. I do not therefore regard her marriage to Roger as an anti-feminist statement in any way, or as a problematic solution to the

novel. Instead, their inauspicious beginning developed into an approximation of a brother-sister bond (due to Molly's acceptance by Mrs Hamley as a substitute for her daughter Fanny), which was ironically reinforced by Roger's engagement to Molly's stepsister Cynthia. It is the narration of Molly's increasing discomfort with Roger and Cynthia's relationship that prepares the reader for her eventual marriage to Roger.

That this tale is multilayered and has various levels of narration functioning simultaneously becomes evident when Molly is mistakenly assumed to be Mr Preston's lover. Lady Harriet, one of Molly's greatest admirers, describes her as having 'a certain *gaucherie* about her' in the context of the mystery surrounding Molly Gibson and Mr Preston's 'clandestine' meetings. Lady Harriet, who as a girl even recognized her governess's real motives as romantic rather than educational, now becomes the interpreter (or reader) in this episode as she compares Molly and Cynthia in the following terms:

'I think it's much more likely that Clare's own daughter - that pretty pawky Miss Kirkpatrick - is the real heroine of this story,' said Lady Harriet. 'She always looks like a heroine of genteel comedy; and those young ladies were capable of a good deal of innocent intriguing, if I remember rightly. Now little Molly Gibson has a certain *gaucherie* about her which would disqualify her at once from any clandestine proceedings.... why, the child is truth itself.'

(1983:578)

Gaskell's story as told in *Wives and Daughters* is one in which the central and omniscient narrator reinforces very different values from those promoted in the kind of 'genteel comedy' to

which Lady Harriet refers. Where Molly is the heroine of *Wives and Daughters*, other values are epitomized by the tales lived out by Cynthia Kirkpatrick and particularly those woven by her more elaborately deceitful mother.

There is a rather poignant dimension to the presentation of Cynthia Kirkpatrick. Appearing in person in Chapter 19 for the first time, she functions in the novel as far more than simply a contrast to Molly. She is presented as a complex mixture of divergent qualities. On the one hand, she abounds in sexual appeal, charm, and even genuine warmth - at least as far as Molly is concerned. On the other, she reveals an incapacity to honour commitments, an excessive desire to please, particularly men, and a certain flightiness. Her more negative traits are subtly presented as an indictment of her mother's upbringing of her, although the formation of her character is not laid entirely at her mother's door but is seen to be partially innate. On an endearing level, she appears to wish to be good. Instead of being presented as bad-natured, she is shown rather to have felt the absence of her mother during her childhood after the death of her father. In the emotional void subsequently created, she tends towards following the ways and wiles of the French girls she was educated with, even though she is presented as being somewhat critical of them. Cynthia shows greater loyalty to Molly (because of her appreciation of the latter's intrinsic worth) than to her mother, whose manoeuvres are transparent to her (as they mostly are to Molly as well) and whose lack of

closeness to her daughter at an early age has left scars and mistrust. In the words of Mr Preston's description of Cynthia to Molly: 'one forgets what she herself is in the halo that surrounds her' (1983:191). When berating himself for 'hankering after a penniless girl, who was as fickle as the wind', he mentally encounters the answer which 'was silly enough, logically; but forcible in fact': 'Cynthia was Cynthia, and not Venus herself could have been her substitute' (1983:558). Significantly, she is associated with a love goddess, whose glories she is even believed to supersede. Roger Hamley is shown to be briefly taken in by the glamour represented by Cynthia but his stay abroad matures him so that on his return he is able to appreciate Molly's superior worth.

Laurie Buchanan's argument is that '[w]ithout successful merging with her mother, Cynthia, instead of valuing her femininity as a positive part of her identity, uses it instead as both a weapon against her own loneliness and a shield to protect herself from further pain' (1990:505). According to Buchanan, whose psychoanalytical approach is mostly convincing, Cynthia is confused 'about her needs and ego boundaries' and reveals this in her word-play on 'near' and 'far'⁴⁰ in her confession to Molly: 'it's born in me to try to make everyone I come near fond of me; but then they shouldn't carry it too far, for it becomes very troublesome if they do' (1983:453). Her lack of inner resolution is captured in her reaction after Mr Gibson's expression of sympathy for Roger as jilted lover:

For a moment Cynthia's wilful fancy stretched after the object passing out of her grasp - Roger's love became for the instant a treasure; but, again, she knew that in its entirety of high undoubting esteem, as well as of passionate regard, it would no longer be hers; and for the flaw which she herself had made she cast it away, and would none of it. Yet often in after years, when it was too late, she wondered and strove to penetrate the inscrutable mystery of 'what would have been'.

(1983:602)

When Cynthia tells her mother that 'I shan't say "yes" to make anyone happy but myself', Buchanan argues that she hereby acquires 'heroine status' (1990:511). The text, however, appears to belie this interpretation. The reader is told that she 'said this to plague her mother, and lessen Mrs Gibson's exuberance of joy ... for her mind was pretty well made up' (1983:653). The passage cited above suggests in fact that Cynthia's mind is not a constant one and that lack of commitment even to her own choices will always mar her happiness.

The reader is never allowed to forget the absence of a solid moral and emotional foundation in the mothering Cynthia received. Cynthia herself, when she appeals for sympathy from Mr Gibson after rejecting Roger, rather touchingly says: 'Oh, sir, I think if I had been differently brought up, I shouldn't have had the sore angry heart I have' (1983:602).

The broad sweep encompassed by this novel is proof of Gaskell's growth as novelist as is her more restrained narrative tone. Rather than telling the reader what to think as was the case at times in say, *Mary Barton*, here the reader is left to see and hear and judge for herself. Material is

more dramatically presented and the wry, amused or ironical tone of the narrator is reminiscent of the narration of Jane Austen rather than the heavy-handed didacticism of the earlier Gaskell. As the narrative strategies become more sophisticated, so do the critiques of society. Women are seen to be actual or potential victims of class and/or gender discrimination, who yet have it in their power to become agents of change in their own lives and within their broader community. Society is challenged firstly, to apply Christian principles such as forgiveness, empathy, and compassion to those in need, and secondly, to educate women to be morally accountable, active participants in society.

This is not meant to imply that Gaskell is straightforward. One of the reasons Gaskell is complex is because of what D'Albertis refers to as her 'dissembling fictions' (1997:1-18).⁴¹ Gaskell, while still being labelled 'charming' and 'feminine' and 'delightful', is capable in *Wives and Daughters* of an almost vicious exposé of the 'typically female' manipulations of a woman character. She herself employs strategies which enable D'Albertis to write:

The subterfuge practiced by this most conventional-seeming of nineteenth-century British women writers led to the production of a unique series of literary texts that reveals in its dramatic irregularity a veritable magpie's assemblage of genres and social discourses, shedding new light on Victorian culture and its discontents at mid-century.

(1997:17)

Yet despite the convincing economic and psychological reasons provided for the subterfuge practised by Mrs Gibson and

Cynthia,⁴² as in all the other novels examined in this study, women in Gaskell's novels are presented as morally accountable. In this respect they are equal to men.

ENDNOTES

1. This includes, among others, Laurence Lerner (1969) in his Introduction to the Penguin edition of *Wives and Daughters*.
2. In fact these circumstances were the death of her son at the age of 10 months. Despite her undertaking in the Preface, in the person of the narrator she does after all refer to this circumstance when she writes of dreams in terms of 'that land where alone I may see, while yet I tarry here, the sweet looks of my dead child' (1970:327).
3. Robberds was the Unitarian minister who hosted Elizabeth Stevenson and introduced her to his junior assistant William Gaskell.
4. Gaskell also published in a journal for working-class women and would clearly have welcomed readers from Mary Barton or Ruth's status in society.
5. This is Stephen Gill's contention (Introduction to Penguin edition, 1970) and has been amply reinforced by Seed's analysis cited earlier.
6. Gill points out that the 'beautifully economic account of the death of Barton's son and the sufferings of the father who cannot provide for his child throws into ludicrous relief Mrs Gaskell's gloss on Barton's anger, namely that it was fanned by agitators' (1970:24).
7. Gill (1970) is among these.
8. See 'Interaction between Text and Reader', 1980:113.
9. See pp. 222-23 above.
10. The deathbed scene of Jem Wilson's father is described in terms which affirm the Christian faith of the majority of the fictional characters in the novel:

He could not speak again. The trump of the archangel would set his tongue free; but not a word more would it utter till then. Yet he heard, he understood, and though sight failed, he moved his hand gropingly over the covering. They knew what he meant, and guided it to her [his wife's] head, bowed and hidden in her hands, when she had sunk in her woe. It rested there with a feeble pressure of endearment. The face grew beautiful, as the soul neared God. A peace beyond understanding came over it.

(1970:110-11)

Bessy Higgins in *North and South*, for example, is dying anyway, but the hope of heaven enables her to die in peace. The final

deathbed scene in *Ruth* also merits close attention, and will be examined in due course.

These instances all suggest the narrator's, and ultimately the author's, endorsement of the Christian faith.

11. Among these critics again is Gill (1970), in his Introduction to the Penguin edition of *Mary Barton*.

12. Both John Barton and John Higgins (in *North and South*) refer with bitterness to the promises held out to them and intending to sweeten their current lot.

13. The context is Will's description of a mermaid:

... whether it were she were just a fickle jade as did not rightly know her own mind (which, seeing one half of her was woman, I think myself was most probable)...

(1970:199)

14. As for the narrative decision to end *Mary Barton* with Jem and Mary's emigration to Canada, Maria Edgeworth had the following to say:

I am sorry that she and her lover emigrate. I think the poetic justice and moral of the story would have been better & as naturally made out by Jem's good character standing against the prejudice, suspicion or envy of his fellow workmen and inspire hope for the future better, without its being improbable, that the noble conduct of Jem should have made such impression on the rich men & the Master manufacturers that they took the case of the workmen for his sake into consideration. This would have been the finest recourse & so have left not only an agreeable but beneficial feeling on the mind.

(Cited in *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage*, 1991:90)

15. They are firstly, Molly Gibson, secondly, her stepsister Cynthia Kirkpatrick and thirdly, the latter's mother, Hyacinth, who becomes Mrs Gibson.

16. See Emanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 1979:187-219.

17. One could then argue that Gaskell compensates for her own discomfort by presenting Ruth's purity of motive and ignorance of wrong-doing as qualifications for being a worthy receptacle of divine grace.

18. *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis*, 1975.

19. See *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, 1966:98-100.

20. In his Introduction to the Oxford edition of *Ruth*.
21. See I Kings 19:4 - But he himself [Elijah] went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree; and he asked that he might die, saying, 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am no better than my fathers.'
22. This has been referred to on p. 250 above.
23. Elizabeth Gaskell is seen to have adamantly refused to heed the plea of Charlotte Brontë to spare Ruth's life. Charlotte Brontë's letter to Elizabeth Gaskell dated 26 April 1852 reads:
- Yet - hear my protest!
Why should she die? Why are we to shut up the book weeping?
- My heart fails me already at the thought of the pang it will have to undergo. And yet you must follow the impulse of your own inspiration. If that commands the slaying of the victim, no bystander has a right to put out his hand to stay the sacrificial knife; but I hold you a stern priestess in these matters.
- (Wise & Symington, eds, vol. 3, 1933:332)
24. Ruth's spiritual growth transforming her into an active bringer of comfort and healing to the sick and dying contrasts strikingly with Tess's inability to rise above her circumstances in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, a novel with which one cannot but compare *Ruth*.
25. As already suggested on p. 240 above, the reaction of burning the book by certain members of her husband's congregation obviously meant that this aim was not fully realized.
26. William Congreve's ironic phrase in *The Way of the World* is used by Lowder-Newton in her chapter on *Pride and Prejudice*, cited on p. 59 above.
27. Gérin, writes:

Wives and Daughters is, of course, something more than a panegyric of country life. It is a long-term view ... of life in general, particularly as it affected women in relation to every phase of family commitment, as daughter, sister, wife, mother.

(1976:281)

28. As Gérin writes of *Wives and Daughters*,

Never ... had Mrs Gaskell been in such total command of her medium, and the gain in fluidity of style and subtlety of effect is enormous. The characters are built up from

within, allowed to speak for themselves in dialogue that subtly identifies them, and Mrs Gaskell is much more ready to efface herself and much less inclined to prompt her readers than in her earlier work. This is a sign of confidence.

(1976:282)

29. Both Margaret Hale and Mrs Thornton are strong and self-reliant in ways which contrast with more conventional portraits of weak women like Edith, Margaret's cousin, and Fanny, Thornton's sister.

30. Uglow regards this novel as concerned above all with the heroine's 'unconscious growth'. Consequently, she finds Gaskell using 'a different form of narrative' in *Wives and Daughters* in order to present

a symbolic account of Molly's inner life, a psycho-drama complete with characters, plots and props, which we understand almost without thinking in the way we apprehend the underlying 'meanings' of Snow White, or Beauty and the Beast. There are five plots in Molly's story: the power of the father; the absent mother; the arrival of the step-mother with her 'webs and distortions of truth'; that acceptance of the sexual double, 'the bad sister'; and the awakening of the sleeping self.

(1993:595)

This analysis forms a compelling basis for reading *Wives and Daughters* as straightforward *Bildungsroman* with Molly Gibson as heroine.

31. Mr Gibson appears to border on misogyny with statements like: 'I think the world would get on tolerably well, if there were no women in it' (1983:572).

32. Elizabeth Leaver speculates that Gaskell's recent work on her biography of Charlotte Brontë may have inspired her portrait both of the governessing done by Mrs Gibson and Miss Eyre: 'Thus the passionate explanation of Charlotte's intense suffering as a governess [in *The Life*] is transformed into a more restrained description of the problematic life of a governess in *Wives and Daughters*' (1997:172). Also, Mr Gibson's own anticipated involvement in Molly's education may suggest the Reverend Patrick Brontë's hands-on involvement in his children's upbringing.

33. Yet he by his talks to her has helped shape her. He was in some ways her mentor. He also stimulated her interest in science.

34. Elizabeth Gaskell's valuing of her own financial independence is illustrated in her acquisition of a house at Plymouth Grove without her husband's knowledge. She looked forward

greatly to surprising him with it. This joy was preempted by her death.

35. Yet I do not agree with Leaver's statement that Gaskell is 'ambivalent' in her presentation of Mrs Gibson:

But the ambiguity of Gaskell's attitude towards Mrs Gibson is perplexing the narrator's attitude towards Mrs Gibson remains problematic. There are too many contradictions and unexplained shifts in authorial attitude to enable the reader to arrive at any firm conclusions.

(1997:191-3)

Besides the conflation between Gaskell's attitude and the narrator's, the awareness of reasons for Mrs Gibson being the way she is should not be confused in my view with approval.

36. In *The Victorian Governess*, Kathryn Hughes uses *Wives and Daughters* as an example of a literary source which suggests that 'governesses who had worked in aristocratic homes found themselves unable to cope with the banalities of provincial married life. ... Dr Gibson's new wife Hyacinth, former governess to Lord and Lady Cumnor, insists that Gibson should no longer eat with his students in the surgery, but should have his meals served to him formally in the dining-room' (1993:143).

37. The lack of direct communication and openness in the Hales' marriage is also subtly indicated throughout *North and South*.

38. Eavesdropping on a confidential medical conversation, for example, between her husband and a colleague, she discovers that Osborne is terminally ill. Consequently she encourages her daughter to transfer her attentions from the heir of Hamley (who is in fact already married, unbeknown to her) to the younger brother Roger.

39. From an unsigned review of *Wives and Daughters* in the *Manchester Examiner and Times*, 27 February 1866:3, cited in *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage*, 1991:469-70.

40. The following extract from Buchanan provides the gist of her view on Cynthia:

The play on 'near' and 'far' reveals her simultaneous need of attention and fear of rejection; it characterizes her inability to make a commitment because of her lack of self-identity. Because of the ambivalence of a sense of self in the mother/daughter symbiosis, Cynthia is particularly vulnerable to her mother's criticism of and dominance over her. She has interpreted her mother's neglect of her as some fault within herself which keeps her mother and other people away; therefore she will always seek approval

and love, yet she will always reject those people who provide these needs. A victim of the exclusive and too-prolonged symbiosis between mother and child, Cynthia will be encumbered by undefined ego boundaries throughout her life.

(1990:504-05)

41. D'Albertis argues convincingly as follows:

Dissembling appears as a plot device in Gaskell's fiction in three principal forms, all of which depend upon secrecy for success. The first and most obvious form is disguise...

A second, related form of dissembling in Gaskell's fiction entails withholding or misrepresenting the truth, generally represented as an underhanded trick of some kind, in order to accomplish a specific purpose....

Finally, Gaskell figures dissembling as a form of political or social resistance. Subversion of unjust authority and denial of the power of that authority to define absolute truth help to structure several Gaskell plots and to foreground intrigue, underground networks, and secret associations in the world of her novels.

(1997:4)

42. Even the upright Margaret Hale in *North and South* is driven to practise subterfuge when it comes to protecting her beloved brother, as does Molly Gibson to protect Cynthia from the pressure of Mr Preston.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I hope to have elucidated the gains made by applying a feminist-narratological grid to the works under discussion. I have tried to show that the feminist emphases in the novels are highlighted by means of the various narrative strategies employed in the texts.

As always in literary studies, though, the contradictions and ambiguities are at least as interesting as the certainties, and that is also the case with the authors that have been examined. The frequently ironic commentary, for instance, in Jane Austen's novels, while attributable to the narrator, finds echoes in her personal correspondence, which lead one to assign as much importance to the shadow side of the representations of marriage, for instance, as to the invariably happy denouement.

With regard to Emily and Anne Brontë, the wildness of the former may at first appear matched by the tameness of the latter, but on closer examination of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* this transpires not to be the case. From a feminist perspective, Anne's points are bolder than Emily's, and even on a technical level, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* contains as radical a use of narrative frames as *Wuthering Heights*. Charlotte Brontë, while writing, apparently, about women's issues, writes more freely as a male persona even in her private correspondence. Her ambivalence about being a woman emerges in different ways in each of her four novels.

Elizabeth Gaskell's work reveals less direct narrative

intervention as her novelistic techniques become progressively more sophisticated. Her Christian references become more subtle and oblique. Her understanding of the way provincial society functions and the pressures it places on women reaches Eliot-like proportions in *Wives and Daughters*.

The study has also brought to light, by implication, some of the different dynamics at work in each author. Neither the intentions nor the narrative strategies found in the individual texts are uniform but certain commonalities are prevalent. These are the foregrounding by means of a variety of narrative strategies of the alternatives women do have despite constraining circumstances, and their moral accountability for the choices they make.

In Jane Austen's novels, marriage invariably represents the culmination of the plot. The novels are structured in such a way, however, that the heroine's potential for making misguided choices is foregrounded. Irony as primary narrative strategy in the novels facilitates a socially deconstructionist reading. The heroine's privilege in marrying the hero is underlined by the societal plight of the lesser privileged female characters, often satirically presented.

Anne Brontë's use of narrative frames has been shown to be a sophisticated subterfuge of the male narrator's perspective, enabling the woman's story made available from within the confines of her diary to be foregrounded. Helen Huntingdon's choices are presented as costly, bold and

courageous. She opts for independence only within the constraints of her moral decision to nurse her dying husband. Her decision to marry Gilbert Markham results from her own emotional need rather than conventional or financial considerations.

All three novels written by Charlotte Brontë examined in this study, namely, *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley* and *Villette*, reveal a preoccupation on the part of the narrator with women's choices regarding dependence versus independence. Narration seems to function most effectively in Charlotte Brontë's work when the first-person perspective is used and the inner struggles of the women characters are fully exposed from within, as in the case of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. With *Shirley*, too, the issue of dependence versus independence is crucial to the two central characters. Caroline's fears and aspirations are centred upon a recognition of her dependency needs while Shirley's battles relate to her aversion to yielding her independence. Brontë's narrative strategies are varied but the central axis of independence versus dependence as a thorny issue facing women remains.

Elizabeth Gaskell's novels all deal with women's choices and reveal a preoccupation with the roles women play in society. Above all, Gaskell is a story-teller. Through her narratives she creates melodrama, intrigue and suspense, whether she is presenting the plight of the working class or the sophisticated wiles of widows wanting to remarry.

Mary Barton aspires to be a lady when she flirts with Harry Carson but ends up courageously declaring her love for her childhood lover in court. She wants to defend Jem Wilson's innocence without implicating her father in the murder of her former suitor. She thus embraces her situation despite its emotional cost. The rather shaky narrative strategies employed in this novel have been discussed in Chapter Five.

The seduced Ruth Hilton, who is persuaded to pose as widowed Ruth Denbigh, nevertheless behaves with great nobility of character and fortitude once her true situation is exposed. She volunteers to nurse the sick and dying, including her ailing seducer, in the process losing her own life. The narrative commands her to pay the ultimate price for her 'fall' into sexual 'sin': her innocence is the ambiguous pivot of Gaskell's narration.

In *North and South* Margaret Hale chooses to identify with the working class as she visits Bessy Higgins and comforts her. Even when seeming to change sides by marrying a manufacturer, she nevertheless uses her newly gained financial power in the interests of the working class. While the narrative contrasts the ways of the South with those of the North, the heroine grows in stature as she is compelled to question former ways and finds herself falling in love with a man she disliked. Again, Gaskell centralizes a woman's choice and powers.

Wives and Daughters is Gaskell's most complex

achievement. It presents the narratives of three women characters whose lives are interwoven. Hyacinth Kirkpatrick's marriage to Mr Gibson dramatically affects the heroine's life, and Cynthia's deviousness is also seen to be a result both of her mother's neglect and influence. Mrs Gibson herself is an interesting combination of so-called typically feminine qualities: superficiality, allure, manipulateness, and 'learned helplessness'. These are portrayed in meticulous detail and with consistent satire. The telling of these three women's stories as they interconnect is a complicated affair. Between Mr Preston and the two Hamley brothers, not to mention Mr Gibson himself, the attentions and affections of the three women are divided and disguised. It is indeed a pity that Gaskell's premature death robbed both her and the readers of the conclusive ending only she could have provided.

What remains to be done is to compare women writers' narrative strategies with those of their male counterparts. While I certainly would not suggest that women writers have a monopoly on any particular narrative strategy, I do maintain that there is a tendency among the women writers under discussion in this study to use narration to problematize women's issues.

APPENDIX

Preface to the Second Edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

While I acknowledge the success of the present work to have been greater than I anticipated, and the praises it has elicited from a few kind critics to have been greater than it deserved, I must also admit that from some other quarters it has been censured with an asperity which I was as little prepared to expect, and which my judgment, as well as my feelings, assures me is more bitter than just. It is scarcely the province of an author to refute the arguments of his censors and vindicate his own productions, but I may be allowed to make here a few observations with which I would have prefaced the first edition, had I foreseen the necessity of such precautions against the misapprehensions of those who would read it with a prejudiced mind or be content to judge it by a hasty glance.

My object in writing the following pages was not simply to amuse the Reader, neither was it to gratify my own taste, nor yet to ingratiate myself with the Press and the Public: I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it. But as the priceless treasure too frequently hides at the bottom of a well, it needs some courage to dive for it, especially as he that does so will be likely to incur more scorn and obloquy

for the mud and water into which he has ventured to plunge, than thanks for the jewel he procures; as, in like manner, she who undertakes the cleansing of a careless bachelor's apartment will be liable to more abuse for the dust she raises, than commendation for the clearance she effects. Let it not be imagined, however, that I consider myself competent to reform the errors and abuses of society, but only that I would fain contribute my humble quota towards so good an aim, and if I can gain the public ear at all, I would rather whisper a few wholesome truths therein than much soft nonsense.

As the story of 'Agnes Grey' was accused of extravagant overcolouring in those very parts that were carefully copied from the life, with a most scrupulous avoidance of all exaggeration, so, in the present work, I find myself censured for depicting *con amore*, with 'a morbid love of the coarse, if not of the brutal', those scenes which, I will venture to say, have not been more painful for the most fastidious of my critics to read, than they were for me to describe. I may have gone too far, in which case I shall be careful not to trouble myself or my readers in the same way again; but when we have to do with vice and vicious characters, I maintain it is better to depict them as they really are than as they would wish to appear. To represent a bad thing in its least offensive light is doubtless the most agreeable course for a writer of fiction to pursue; but is it the most honest, the

safest? Is it better to reveal the snares and pitfalls of life to the young and thoughtless traveller, or to cover them with branches and flowers? Oh, Reader! if there were less of this delicate concealment of facts - this whipering 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace, there would be less of sin and misery to the young of both sexes who are left to wring their bitter knowledge from experience.

I would not be understood to suppose that the proceedings of the unhappy scapegrace with his few profligate companions I have here introduced are a specimen of the common practices of society: the case is an extreme one, as I trusted none would fail to perceive; but I know that such characters do exist, and if I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain. But, at the same time, if any honest reader shall have derived more pain than pleasure from its perusal, and have closed the last volume with a disagreeable impression on his mind, I humbly crave his pardon, for such was far from my intention; and I will endeavour to do better another time, for I love to give innocent pleasure. Yet, be it understood, I shall not limit my ambition to this, - or even to producing 'a perfect work of art': time and talents so spent I should consider wasted and misapplied. Such humble talents as God has given me I will endeavour to put to their greatest use; if I am able to amuse I will try to benefit too; and when I feel it

my duty to speak an unpalatable truth, with the help of God, I will speak it, though it be to the prejudice of my name and to the detriment of my reader's immediate pleasure as well as my own.

One word more, and I have done. Respecting the author's identity, I would have it to be distinctly understood that Acton Bell is neither Currer nor Ellis Bell, and therefore, let not his faults be attributed to them. As to whether the name be real or fictitious, it cannot greatly signify to those who know him only by his works. As little, I should think, can it matter whether the writer so designated is a man, or a woman as one or two of my critics profess to have discovered. I take the imputation in good part, as a compliment to the just delineation of my female characters; and though I am bound to attribute much of the severity of my censors to this suspicion, I make no effort to refute it, because, in my own mind, I am satisfied that if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author may be. All novels are or should be written for both men and women to read, and I am at a loss to conceive how a man should permit himself to write anything that would be really disgraceful to a woman, or why a woman should be censured for writing anything that would be proper and becoming for a man.

Anne Brontë
July 22nd, 1848.

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