

Imperialism Ideology and the Brontës:
The Case of *Agnes Grey*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Professor*, *Jane Eyre*, and
***Villette* (1)**

Martha Renée Navarro
mnavarro@hum.unrc.edu.ar
Universidad Nacional de Río Cuarto

Imperialism ideology already permeated British society when Victoria was crowned in 1837 and she was to strengthen it along the years of a reign that she herself referred to as the “Victorian Age.” In fact, Britain was an old imperialist country, but the Empire achieved its fullest expansion in the nineteenth century. Such physical expansion was inevitably accompanied with the development of a body of ideas that justified and indeed exalted the role and place of the Empire in the British scheme of things. Writings on nationalism, the opening of the Suez Canal, the Boer War, as well as the Franco-Prussian war had a preponderant role in the development of British nationalistic feelings. The conviction that the white Anglo-Saxon race was unquestionably superior merged with Victorian values and ethics, making the concepts and practice of imperialism appear “natural” in the eyes of most British people. The nineteenth-century British world view is therefore one in which, as Susan Meyer has so well said, “it is a given that humans could be divided into discrete races, that the white or Anglo-Saxon *race* is unquestionably superior, and that all the other races represent varying degrees of fallings off from perfection and share a certain similarity, in that they are not white.”(2)

Victorian writers - whether fervent critics or faithful supporters of imperialism, consciously or unconsciously, overtly or covertly, men or women – reflected its ideology in their works. In the case of women, it is well known that Victorian society imposed severe restrictions, and that these restrictions operated at every level – political, religious, legal, social, and economic. For this reason, the reader could assume too promptly, and erroneously, that Victorian writings by women are void of imperialistic ideology. In this essay, I argue that, although in very different ways, Victorian women’s fiction indeed reproduces, and in many cases adheres to and perpetuates, imperialistic discourse. Part of my contention rests on the belief that Victorian values and imperialism ideology so much infected each other that it is practically impossible to discuss one separated from the other.

In *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women’s Fiction*, Susan Meyer raises an issue against such “generalizations.” She takes distance from much of the “seminal work written in the last few years on the relationship between the novel and empire” because of its “*general* contention” that “there is an *essential uniform* relationship to empire among British writers,” and that “most of the domestic fiction of nineteenth-century Britain ultimately affirms imperialist ideology.”(3) Meyer argues that “the idea that white women were like, or could be likened to, people of other races [hence, reduced to an “inferior” condition] recurs frequently in nineteenth-

century writing.” But “some [women] writers were necessarily situated differently from their male contemporaries in relation to [that] idea,” she remarks. “[The idea] indeed undergoes a transmutation as it appears in their fiction.” This makes Meyer conclude that critics’ *generalizations* have “obscured” the fact that the social positioning of various nineteenth-century domestic novelists in Britain “put them in different relation to the project of empire.” “It was precisely the gender positioning of these women writers in British society in combination with their feminist impulses and their use of race as metaphor,” she insists, “that provoked and enabled an (albeit partial) questioning of British imperialism.” Meyer offers a feminist reading of five nineteenth-century works by Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, and George Eliot, and analyzes the way in which these writers use race metaphorically to explore gender issues and question British imperialism. “What links the two terms of the metaphor, in the fiction of these writers, she contends, “comes to be not shared inferiority but a shared experience of frustration, limitation and subordination.”(4)

This essay offers a different reading of some nineteenth-century women writers’ metaphorical use of race. Working from a historical and socio-cultural perspective, I discuss some salient characteristics of imperialism ideology, establish their interrelationship with Victorian values, and show how such ideology is contained in five novels by the Brontë sisters: Anne’s *Agnes Grey*, Emily’s *Wuthering Heights*, and Charlotte’s *The Professor*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Villette*.(5) In the process, I resort to Meyer’s interesting piece as a useful terrain for critical discussion, and against which to articulate some of my arguments. Although the three writers in this study belong to the same gender and class positioning in British society, their individual responses to imperialism ideology are different. More than being entirely constrained by feminist issues, these writers’ metaphorical (and sometimes non-metaphorical but direct) use of race is dictated by their own Victorian values and ethics, which in turn cannot be separated from the implications of these values in imperialistic ideology. How could any individual possibly deny, negate, “handle,” her/his unconscious?

Imperialism is rooted in the very notion of superiority. Whatever its form, it is an expansionist economic system that claims to have its roots in a universal human nature. It also boasts of possessing an extraordinary cultural system that results from the success of that economic system. Imperialism characterizes itself as a missionary project to the world, that is, a consolidated crusade for “civilization” and development. European imperialism was a success. It was achieved over nature, but a nature inhabited by peoples whose defeat, expropriation, enslavement or extermination had to be justified in a series of rhetorical formulations that relied on categories proclaimed as fundamental and universal. History and race were among these categories.

“History” and “race” (with its subcategories, “class” and “gender”) are therefore fundamental to imperialism ideology. In the nineteenth century, Hegel’s philosophy of history was used to justify the argument whereby the “responsibility” of completing human history had been passed to the European nations. In this light, all other nations had fulfilled their historical destinies and belonged to the past. Both present and future therefore belonged to the “white” Europeans.(6) Darwin’s scientific theories also were invoked to support and justify this version of historical destiny. The concepts of evolution, natural selection and the survival of the “fittest” were used to describe and classify human relationships and societies. The various imperial powers in Europe promoted the idea of a “universal civilization” that had the power and “duty” to “civilize” and overcome barbarity, backwardness, and savagery in highly specific national terms. For example, the British Empire produced a discourse of chivalric, “gentlemanly” behaviour towards “inferior races” – this as an extension of, and substitute for, its christianizing mission

throughout the world. The French Empire, on the other hand, produced a discourse of “culture,” that is, their mission to humankind as a conferral of the “benefits” of French culture to “inferior” societies. In one case or the other, a version of national identity and destiny was translated into a civilizing mission for humanity at large. Notions of superiority were – and are still - used to justify domination.(7)

Ann Brontë’s *Agnes Grey* initially seems to resist being read in terms of imperialism ideology. The author makes only three references to imperialism in the text at large – “nabob,” “New Zealand” and “abroad.” In turn, she represses, that is, “silences” the topic. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator informs the reader that “[her mother’s sister] had married a nabob.”(8) Later, when Agnes arrives at Horton Lodge, she is overwhelmed by “a strange feeling of desolation.” She is unable to find adequate words to describe her state, so she resorts to an association. “[N]o one... can possibly imagine what [my feelings] were,” she remarks, – “hardly even if he has known what it is to awake some morning and find himself at Port Nelson, New Zealand, with a world of waters between himself and all that knew him.” The third reference, almost imperceptible and quite indirect, occurs when Rosalie enthusiastically tells Miss Grey about Harry Meltham: “He is so greatly improved since he returned from abroad – you can’t think.”(9) For the Victorian reader, both the meaning and connotations of the words did not require further explanation or development. Brontë’s silencing, or repression, of ideology was natural; it was part of Victorian social codes and values. For the modern reader, on the other hand, it is precisely by silencing those references that the writer engages imperialism ideology.

In fact, what matters to this discussion is not so much the words relating to imperialistic practice *per se* as the abstraction of their implications. Historically speaking, the link with British expansionism is direct. By definition, a “nabob” was “a servant of the East India Company who had amassed fortunes in India, sometimes unscrupulously, which then used for bettering his economic and social position in England.”(10) In turn, the East India Company was a chartered company of London merchants that gradually transformed trading privileges in Asia into a territorial empire centered on India. Already in the eighteenth century, a period of expansion, the East India Company “emerg[ed] as the greatest European trader in India,” and it increasingly acted as “an instrument of colonial government.” By the time of Queen Victoria’s reign, it “served as Britain’s administrative agents in India.”(11) In addition, New Zealand became an English colony in 1840, so it already was part of the Empire when Anne Brontë wrote *Agnes Grey*. Finally, for a Victorian man of Mr. Meltham’s age and social standing, “return[ing] from abroad” most certainly implied returning from service in the military and the colonies. According to Victorian stricture and the notions of social hierarchies, a “nabob” could be very rich but was not “respectable.” Not only did he “make” his economic and social position but also was “corrupted” from years living in contact with the “primitive” and “uncivilized.”

The situation of the nabob, as that of any Englishman in the colonies, positioned him at a “vast distance from the morality enshrined in the Victorian home,” as Meyer points out. His “moral degeneracy,” in Victorian ethics, is marked by what is, from the perspective of British imperialistic ideology, a “racial degeneracy.” As Meyer says, “the English home is [strictly] inward-turning and self-enclosed, containing only the family and thus existing as a place of retreat from public life.” In the colonies, however, such a home becomes “a place of buying and selling where the Indian, Chinese and British bodies mix.”(12) The woman who married a man “infected” by that kind of life – like the single lady who sought for “employment outside the home,” either in England or the colonies - “irreparably compromised [her] gentility.”(13) Consequently, it is not surprising that the highly prejudiced Victorian mind refrained itself from related considerations. Brontë’s narrator offers a good example.

“New Zealand” works as a psychological metaphor. Brontë uses the image to emphasize not only the magnitude of Agnes’s feeling of isolation but also her lack of belonging and the “foreignness” of the place. The systematicity that allows the reader to comprehend one aspect of the concept (Agnes’ feeling of desolation) in terms of another (the Englishman’s impression in New Zealand) necessarily hides other aspects of the concept. The narrator psychologically connects the “unknown world,” the “wilderness” she sees through the window and the distant, strange, “uncivilized” New Zealand. The “world of water” that separates the man from home (England) further contributes to the idea of remoteness and “foreignness” conveyed by the previous metaphor. New Zealand was, after all, an “uncivilized” territory that the English people were to “civilize.” Anne Brontë’s notion of New Zealand is not experiential; she did not really know what it was like to “awake” in New Zealand. The false analogy she establishes between the narrator’s feelings and the imagined person’s are a clear projection of her Victorian conception – ultimately, imperialist ideology.

Anne Brontë’s abstractions in *Agnes Grey* can be further discussed in terms of European Enlightenment rationality. With its faith in reason and its practice of abstraction, European Enlightenment also fed into imperial theory. Theodor Adorno’s work on the Enlightenment is particularly helpful here. If we accept the notion that the West has imperially constructed the world in its own image, that image itself is a construction. In such construction, the relationship between a representation and what is represented inevitably involves what philosophers Adorno and Horkheimer call the “organized control of mimesis.”(14) Repression, both in the political and psychological sense, is central to it. Anything foreign to an established structure of representation, its “other,” is demonized and therefore open to extinction. Furthermore, “the distance between subject and object, a presupposition of abstraction, is grounded in the distance from the thing itself which the master achieved through the mastered.”(15) The abstraction of reason led to the elimination of the sensory, sensuous world of the primitive (or natural). This fed into imperial theory since the inhabitants of colonized territories were considered to be immersed in that kind of world and therefore incapable of the rational condition of the European. Hence, the non-rational (myth, magic, superstition, animality, rituals involving the body) had to be suppressed by the rational categories. The “invisibility” Anne Brontë imposes on “inferior nations” results from the marriage between Victorian social values and imperialism ideology.

While *Agnes Grey* covertly inscribes itself into imperialist ideology through its narrator’s “obliviousness” of the topic, *Wuthering Heights* does it more directly. Emily Brontë’s novel is, no doubt, the most complex of the five works in this study – both in content and structure. The complexity of its theme, narrative devices, and character creation, however, does not block the reader from capturing imperialism motifs at work. Heathcliff’s characterization comes to mind first.

Heathcliff’s character and nature reflect all the stereotypical features of the “other” – the “non-white” European, “savage,” “uncivilized.” Nelly Dean describes the first appearance of the child Heathcliff, brought from Liverpool by Mr. Earnshaw: “It’s as dark as if it came from the devil.” Then, “...a dirty, ragged, black-haired child...it only stared round and round, and repeated over and over again some gibberish that nobody could understand.” Finally, “The master tried to explain...a tale of seeing it starving, and houseless, and as good as dumb [speechless], in the streets of Liverpool, where he enquired for its *owner*.” (16)

“Owner” is indeed a suggestive word. Heathcliff enters the narrative in 1771. By the end of the eighteenth century, Liverpool handled five-eighths of the English slave trade and seven-eighths of the entire European trade. Ships would travel from Liverpool with goods to the Guinea Coast, there unload slaves, traverse the Middle Passage to the New World, and return to

Liverpool with shiploads of rum and molasses and slaves known as “leftovers.” In the city of Liverpool, “free or discarded blacks swelled the ranks of the poor and destitute...[T]he gruesome accessories of the slave trade were on display in shop windows: ‘chains and manacles, devices for forcing open Negroes’ mouths...thumbscrews and all other instruments of oppression.’”(17)

Top Withens, the actual locus of *Wuthering Heights*, is known to have been the site of a slave trader. This is a fact that Emily Brontë certainly would have known. The reader therefore wonders whether that could be the source of the brooding, damned nature of the narrative, of the pervasive violence, the dreadful interior of *Wuthering Heights* and the misery of the lives lived within it. Charlotte’s own words in the Preface to the 1850 edition of *Wuthering Heights* inevitably come to mind when considering such possibility: “Though [Emily’s] feeling for the people round was benevolent, intercourse with them she never sought.”(18) But, most important, she adds: “And yet she knew them; knew their ways, their language, their family histories, she could hear of them with interest and talk of them with detail, minute, graphic, and accurate.” In the light of this reasoning, and in tune with the historical period, one could perhaps speculate on Heathcliff as inspired by the child of a slave captain and an African woman.

Heathcliff’s “disappearance” for three years adds to the speculation and helps further connections with imperialism. Wild, speechless child, furious, and restless, he disappears from the narrative for three years to “seek his fortune,” and returns tamed, and damned, and very rich. (19) We are never told exactly what business he was engaged in. Neither are we told details about Mr. Earnshaw’s employment - only that he has to go to Liverpool. As the case was in *Agnes Grey*, abstractions are quite significant here. Slave trade, entrepreneurs making fortunes in the West Indies or Africa, ultimately imperialism practice, is insistently present in Brontë’s characterization of Heathcliff.

Other references also contribute to the recognition of imperialist stereotyping of “the other.” Intrigued by “that pretty girl-widow” (young Cathy), Mr. Lockwood wants “to know her history; whether she be a native of the country, or, as is more probable, an exotic that the surly indigenae will not recognise for kin.”(20) In this case, it is the “white” Englishman from the city that is projecting his prejudices to the “uncultivated,” “primitive,” inhabitant of the country. The “other” and “its” strange surroundings are now placed at home rather than in distant places of the world. When Heathcliff and Catherine go to the Grange and the latter is caught by the dog, Mr. Linton’s comments on Heathcliff are: “Oho!...he is that strange acquisition my late neighbour made in his journey to Liverpool – a little Lascar, or an American or Spanish castaway.”(21) To this, his wife adds: “A wicked boy, at all events...and quite unfit for a decent house! Did you notice his language, Linton?” In essence, the Lintons’ response to Heathcliff is actually not very different from Mr. Lockwood’s thoughts about the inhabitants of the Heights. The notion of social and cultural superiority permeates both Victorian and imperialism ideology.

Heathcliff’s characterization is clearly ambiguous. In the novel, he is associated with gypsies, Chinese, Indians as well as Africans. He is definitely an ‘outsider,’ the “other.” But, curiously enough, Emily Brontë also identifies him with Catherine. “I *am* Heathcliff – he’s always, always in my mind – not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself – but as my own being,” she says to Nelly. This pairing initially seems to destabilize the novel’s adherence to the imperialistic project. If the stereotype of the “other” is projected to the “English” Catherine, the concept entailed in the metaphor definitely opens another layer of meaning. Terry Eagleton reads Heathcliff in the context of Ireland. “[He] is a fragment of the Famine,” he argues, “[t]he hunger in *Wuthering Heights* is called Heathcliff.”(22) In this light, the character stands for the thousands of Irish who had to leave Ireland as a result of British colonial oppression. Susan Meyer, drawing on the Heathcliff-Catherine connection, interprets the metaphor in terms

of the “novel’s persistence in affirming transgression against British social structures.” She further points out that “Catherine Earnshaw’s resistance to female acculturation, her ‘half savage nature,’ is metaphorically represented not on her own body but associatively, in the companion from whom in childhood she is inseparable: the dark-skinned gypsy Heathcliff.” Meyer pushes the meaning of the metaphor even after Catherine dies in the novel. She then reads Heathcliff as “liv[ing] on, embodying energies of resistance that persist after his original figurative role seems over.” However, following his transformations in the course of the story, she has to conclude that “the dark character’s role in *Wuthering Heights* so much exceeds the metaphorical that...it virtually loses the concern with women’s oppression so important in its earlier chapters.”(23)

The Catherine-Heathcliff connection works mainly at a symbolic level. Heathcliff is the “dark,” “savage,” outsider, created by imperialism ideology. Catherine is English, but she is also an “outsider” in her own home (England), by virtue of Victorian values. A country resident – not a city dweller – and a woman, she is “inferior” in the social scale. The fact that Rev. Patrick Brontë was an Irish immigrant helps to speculate about the prejudices and feelings of rejection by the British, to which the entire family must have been exposed in England. This, together with the fact that Emily Brontë loved freedom above all things, makes feasible to think of *Wuthering Heights* as an introspective novel, a meditation on oppression – not gender oppression, as Susan Meyer maintains, but one that is more profound and existential, one that involves the social, racial, cultural, as well as the political.

While the direction and implications of imperialism ideology remain somewhat ambiguous and private in *Wuthering Heights*, they are explicit and public in the three novels by Charlotte Brontë. In relation to *Jane Eyre*, Susan Meyer surprisingly argues that “[h]istory *may* make itself felt” in some “*subtle* moments,” and even points out that “Brontë’s metaphorical use of race has a *certain* fidelity to the history of British imperialism.”(24) By accepting Meyer’s point, the reader would be fictionalizing history itself. *Jane Eyre* indeed represents British colonial issues (therefore history) more strikingly than many other Victorian novels written by women. *Jane Eyre*, like *The Professor* and *Villette*, show how deeply issues like imperialism, race, and “orientalism” (Said’s term) – ultimately history – condition a writer’s thinking about sexuality and private life, and how preoccupations with sexual oppression led Victorian women novelists to reflect on other social issues.(25)

Jane Eyre is saturated with the language and concerns of empire. The first obvious example is the fact that the central characters’ sense of their own identity – in both economic and psychological terms - depend on the fruits of empire: Jane’s inheritance, Rochester’s first marriage and fortune, St. John’s spiritual mission. As Jane’s Madeiran inheritance illustrates, the autonomy of the Victorian middle-class woman depended on financial independence. Until the Married Woman’s property Act of 1870, a wife’s personal property before marriage became her husband’s absolutely, unless this was settled in trust for her. The husband could assign or dispose of it at his pleasure – even if he and his wife did not live together. Any income that descended to her as an heiress and any money she learned belonged absolutely to her husband. The wife’s position under the Common Law of England was, as John Stuart Mill described it in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), “worse than that of slaves in the laws of many countries.” Although by being single Jane Eyre is not affected by this law, she certainly is by Victorian society. As an unmarried woman, she is supposed to depend on her father. Being an orphan, however, she has no other means of sustenance than the money she earns as a governess at Thornfield Hall. Not marrying Rochester or St. John, Jane gains psychological and economic autonomy through the inheritance she receives from her dead uncle, Mr. Eyre. In sum, Jane’s financial autonomy must be purchased, and this is done at the expense of others’ labor – colonial exploitation.

The fruits of empire also secure Rochester's identity. In fact, he is the symbol of conquest. Of aristocratic blood but with no money by virtue of English Common Law, Rochester can only marry and "make" a fortune out of the West Indian colonies. In England, there was a uniquely severe law applied to men, and which obviously determined the course of their lives: the law of patriarchal inheritance, or Primogeniture, that granted all land to the eldest son. Also called of real property, this law was considered by landowners to be essential for the continuity of the aristocracy, the British Constitution, and English culture. Nevertheless, fathers usually exercised their right to settle some portion of their estate on younger sons and daughters. Younger sons often married heiresses to support themselves. Arranging marriages with daughters of white colonists also was a way for them to obtain the land and the money they did not have, and thus be able to maintain their social prestige in England. In *Jane Eyre*, this is reflected in Rochester's life. His brother is the rightful heir to the family estate and fortune. As the housekeeper at Thornfield Hall tells Jane, "[Rochester's father] was fond of money, and anxious to keep the family estate together. He did not like to diminish the property by division, and yet was anxious that Mr. Edward should have wealth, too, to keep up the consequence of the name." (26) The housekeeper adds that "Old Mr. Rochester and Mr. Rowland combined to bring Mr. Edward into what he considered a painful position, for the sake of making his fortune," The "precise nature of that position" is Rochester's marriage with Bertha – "business" that gave him L 30.000 and a plantation in the West Indies.

Bertha Mason is the most visible victim of colonialism in the novel. A white Créole from Spanish Town, Jamaica, she blurs the line between human and animal. In her madness, her alcoholism, and her propensity for "vice," she is clearly a projection of Victorian imperialist racism and prejudice. "[A] figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight see," says Jane about Bertha when Rochester discloses her after the frustrated marriage ceremony.(27) Her degradation of Bertha continues as she adds: 'it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid *its* head and face.'(28) Jane's attitude is clearly xenophobic, reflecting the common metropolitan belief about the effects of "the tropics" on European colonists and their descendents. Considered to have been "tropicalized" by their environment, these were emotionally high-strung, lazy, and sexually excessive in the eyes of the British at home. Rochester's attitude towards Bertha and her family reproduces this. "Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family; - idiots and maniacs through three generations!," he cries trying to justify his deceit in wanting to marry Jane. "Her mother, the Creole, was both a mad woman and a drunkard! – as I found out after I had wed the daughter: for they were silent on family secrets before. Bertha, like a dutiful child, copied her parent in both points," he continues to say.(29) As the "mixed" product of European and non-European cultures, Bertha presents unmistakably the fears of contamination, "deterioration of the 'race,'" that typically afflicted the Victorian imperialist imagination.

What is even more crucial about the stereotyping of Bertha, however, is the way in which Jane's identity depends on the complex relationship of doubling between herself and Rochester's first wife. Feminist critics have traditionally interpreted Bertha's role in the text as a projection of Jane's self – the dark, rebellious, side of her nature. In other words, Bertha and Jane have been read as two embodiments of one character. Susan Meyer adheres to the metaphorical value of the Jane-Bertha linkage. She argues that "as Brontë constructs the trope in the novel, the yoking between the two terms of the metaphor turns not on shared inferiority [because white women are compared to people of nonwhite races] but on shared oppression."(30) Clearly enough, both interpretations limit the role of the doubling to Jane's psychic condition, erasing Bertha as a

character with textual significance of her own. In Charlotte Brontë's mind, Bertha's melodramatic figure is a metaphor, but it stands for the other part – or element - of the binary involved in a psychological power-relations duel (England-colonies, white-Creole, Jane-Bertha). Jane's desires for power and rebellion cannot be removed from the context of European domination, as figured in her juxtaposition to Bertha.

Conventional Victorian attitudes about the vulnerability of the white woman to tropical climates (assumption made in the novel by all those who hear about Jane's possible voyage to India, for instance) map out the racist terrain that suggests the "purity" and delicacy of white women. Unlike Bertha, the mad woman and symbol of female self-indulgence and sexual appetite, Jane, the "proper" Englishwoman, restricts all sexual activity to the boundaries of the "patriarchal family" (England, or the home, bringing Meyer's back to mind). In terms of imperialist ideology, it is the Englishwoman who must bear the children ("sons") responsible for expanding and defending the English empire and who, consequently, must also control the "purity" of her progeny (Englishness). Bertha Mason, the "intemperate and unchaste" Creole woman is therefore unsuited for that role not because of any psychological disorder from which she might be suffering but because of the "appetites" and "excesses" she is attributed as a result of her Creoleness. Jane does not marry St. John. Neither does she accompany him to India, where she can get "polluted" in spite of her "benevolent mission" of Christianizing non-white "heathens" and providing spiritual support to the white that have become "corrupted." Brontë's heroine not only keeps her Englishness intact but also makes sure that the empire survives, as the ending of *Jane Eyre* suggests. Jane and Rochester are finally happily married, they have a "new" home, and their union is blessed with a "son."

If Rochester is made savage by his bond to Bertha (the "lunatic," "gross, impure, depraved" wife), he is both literally and symbolically purified by the heavenly heroine, Jane Eyre. As Joyce Zonana says, "missionaries, abolitionists, and, by midcentury, common English people of all sorts dwelled on the excesses of plantation society." (31) The West Indian plantation owner and, by association, all the members of his family were convenient symbols of evil and immorality by the time Charlotte Brontë chose to write about the moral recuperation of one of such "tainted" personages in *Jane Eyre*.

But Charlotte Brontë's concern with moral recuperation is not limited to Rochester and *Jane Eyre*. Although in a different way, it is also visible in *The Professor* and *Villette*. In the former, William Crimsworth meets and captivates Frances Henri, a Protestant Anglo-Swiss pupil, whom he ends up marrying, and "rewarding" by taking her to England after enculturating her with Englishness. In the latter, Lucy Snowe falls in love with M. Paul, a Belgian who is vehemently Catholic, and anti-English, as she is Evangelical and anti-French. Unlike Frances, or even Rochester in relation to Jane, M. Paul does not succumb to Lucy's enculturation, so he is "punished" by meeting death or, ultimately, not marrying the English heroine. Unlike the previous novels by the three sisters, in which the projections of imperialism involve stereotypes from non-white races, Charlotte now deals with "white-to-white" encounters. British notions of superiority, in the novel, permeate relations within England (through the workings of Victorian social values) and on the Continent (through cultural imperialism). Territorial expansion and trade monopoly led to great rivalry between the British and the French empires throughout the world. In Europe, their rivalry was based on cultural hegemony.

Although *The Professor*, and especially *Villette*, have almost exclusively been analyzed in terms of their autobiographical content, it is impossible not to see how much both works also lend themselves to the workings of imperialist ideology and practice. Crimsworth, in spite of his masculinity, is akin to Lucy Snowe in many respects and, quite similarly, Lucy is akin to

Charlotte Brontë. Crimsworth moderates his expectations for fear and disappointment, as Lucy constantly does in *Villette*.⁽³²⁾ Like Lucy, he curbs any signs of emotion; his appearance, like Lucy Snowe's, is unenticing. Furthermore, there is a moral cruelty in Crimsworth, as there is in Lucy Snowe. He coerces Francis Henri and searches out her faults, as Lucy coerces Ginevra Franshawe and is constantly expectant for her failings. But where Lucy Snowe and William Crimsworth most resemble is in their prejudice against the Belgian people: their country, their society, their religion. Charlotte Brontë herself considered the Belgians "singularly cold, selfish, animal and inferior and the Catholic Church a most feeble childish piece of humbug."⁽³³⁾ Either from a personal or a cultural/national perspective, English pride and sense of cultural superiority are reproduced in Brontë's two protagonists.

In fact, the two novels are exercises of such ideology from beginning to end. In *The Professor* the title itself suggests the "civilizing" project of imperialism. The protagonist, William Crimsworth, leaves home (England) to teach English in Belgium, thus conforming to the process of displacement that the civilizing mission requires. In *Villette*, Lucy Snowe echoes this mission. Following her arrival in Belgium, and even before "conquering" the French language, she also becomes a teacher of English and disseminator of English culture. The notion of superiority of the English culture and language over the French indeed permeates the whole of both stories, and Brontë makes sure that her protagonists' "Englishness" is well understood. Crimsworth's story, as well as Lucy's, are "framed in imagery of opposition, of antipathy, or rejection and resistance," and "the negativism of the prose is accompanied by a constant emphasis of refusal and denial," as Heather Glen points out.⁽³⁴⁾

William Crimsworth is the prototype of the Victorian imperialist male. From the very beginning in the *The Professor*, the reader is told that he has a friend who "had accepted a Government appointment in one of the colonies," feels himself superior, represses his emotions, decides to engage trade, is proper-language conscious, and defines his nature by differentiating himself from the "other" – "I am no Oriental;" he says, "white cheeks, clusters of bright curls do not suffice for me."⁽³⁵⁾ In a reversal of character and situations, *Villette* echoes *The Professor*. Lucy Snowe is a solitary, repressed but determined woman, who likes nothing but what is English. "Vive l'Angleterre, l'histoire et les heroes! Abas la France, la Fiction et les Faquins!," she cries in an assault of nationalistic pride. She also identifies herself and her "race" by establishing differences with the "other": "The continental 'female' is quite a different being to the insular 'female' of the same age and class: I never saw such eyes and brows in England," she thinks as she enters the classroom for the first time.⁽³⁶⁾ The intention of such contrasts invariably involves putting distance from "otherness," non-Englishness – whether at a racial, social or cultural level, or all.

Cultural prejudices are everywhere in *The Professor* and *Villette*. Travelling from Ostend to Brussels, through the beautiful Bruges and Ghent and the landscapes of Memling and van der Weyden, Crimsworth sees only flatness and monotony ("a grey, dead sky," "wet road," "wet fields, wet house-tops"); as if the British had invented it, he complains that the Belgians cannot make tea "properly;" with an air of superiority, he criticizes a Flemish chambermaid ("her physiology eminently stupid") because she answers his French surlily in Flemish. Crimsworth also dislikes the Belgian boys at M. Pelet's school as much as Lucy Snowe dislikes the Belgian girls at Mme. Beck's. "Their intellectual faculties were generally weak, their animal propensities strong...Such being the case, it would have been truly absurd to exact from them much in the way of mental exertion," he says. Annoyed at the lack of discipline, Lucy Snowe refers to "Blanche...a young baronne" as "the eldest, tallest, handsomest, and most vicious." Walking to her she "[stood] before her desk, [took] from under her hand her exercise-book...deliberately

read the composition, which I found very stupid, and as deliberately, and in the face of the whole school, [tore] the blotted page in two.”(37)

Crimsworth’s insularity and excessive pride is at times really coarse. When the mother of his French headmaster invites him to tea to discuss business, he suspects that the old lady may intend to seduce him. “Surely she’s not going to make love to me...I’ve heard of old Frenchwomen doing odd things in that line...They generally begin such affairs with eating and drinking, I believe.” Crimsworth also takes the gracious manners of the Belgian girls to be “precocious impurity” and blames it on “Romish wizard-craft.” But his intolerance extends beyond their religion to their country. Insultingly, he says: “[T]hat deformity of person and imbecility of intellect whose frequency in the Low Countries would seem to furnish proof that the climate is such as to induce degeneracy of the human mind and body.” Charlotte Brontë endows both William Crimsworth and Lucy Snowe with her own Victorian truculence.(38)

Like Crimsworth, Lucy Snowe passes through Ostend, Bruges and Ghent, ignoring everything but the cold and rain. “Somewhat bare, flat and treeless was the route along which the journey lay; and slimy canals, crept like half-torpid snakes, beside the road,” she points out. “The sky too was monotonously grey,” she adds. The details she does observe betray that strange attention to trivial objects which are usually perceived during a tense experience, such as the paving stones outside Mme. Beck’s school after she has knocked for admission. Already established at that school, which she calls “this land of convents and confessionals,” she believes “a subtle essence of Romanism pervaded every arrangement” and that “[e]ach mind was raised in slavery.” Besides rejecting the Catholicism of the Belgians, Lucy Snowe is convinced that they hate the English, prejudices that she has in her own English mind. She remarks that “for it is curious how these clowns of Labassecour secretly hate England!” In turn, she derides the clowns by saying: “I believe it would take two Labassecourien carpenters to drive a nail.”(39) Through Lucy Snowe, as well as through William Crimsworth, Brontë reproduces the cultural, religious, and social - ultimately national - prejudices of the English against their French rivals.

Charlotte Brontë’s concern with “Englishness” as a mark of superiority is also reflected in her insistence on the “qualities” she assigns to English male characters (Crimsworth and John, for example). As Susan Meyer points out, nineteenth-century scientists agreed that “humankind was divided into discrete races, that race was a crucial determinant of physical, intellectual, and moral character, and that white Europeans were the superior race.”(40) Europeans applied these same principles to establish convenient differences among themselves. The ancient Greeks were often taken as “supreme exemplars of the supreme race.” Brontë depicts William Crimsworth according to the Greek ideal. He has “light complexion,” “powerful presence,” “straight nose,” and “arched eyebrows,” physiognomy that stands in sharp contrast to that attributed to Mr. Hunsden (“small and “feminine lineaments,” “long and dark locks,” “suggesting the idea of a foreigner,” “with a dash of something Gallic”). In *Villette*, John has “no common aspect... a most pleasant character, and...mouth; his chin [is] full, cleft, Grecian and perfect...an English complexion, eyes, and form.” His physiognomy contrasts sharply with the French M. Paul’s. He is insistently described as a “small,” “dark,” “fiery and grasping little man.”(41)

But the Victorian sense of hierarchical order was also marked among the British at home. This is reflected in the power relation game that occurs in the novel between William Crimsworth and his own brother. “My southern accent annoyed him; the degree of education evinced in my language irritated him; my punctuality, industry, and accuracy fixed his dislike,” William thinks. “Had I been inferior to him,” he continues, “he would not have hated me so thoroughly...I was guarded by three faculties – Caution, Tact, Observation...my natural sentinels.” This local English-English encounter takes place in terms of binary oppositions, as ruled by Victorian

standards of class (north/south, city/country, middle-class/aristocracy, southern (metropolitan)/northern (provincial) accent). Furthermore, Crimsworth's aristocratic mother "had bequeathed to [him] much of her features and countenance – her forehead, her eyes, her complexion." He has then inherited "the intelligence, the sweetness and the sadness of those fine grey eyes, the mental power of that forehead, and the rare sensibility of that serious mouth" he contemplates in her mother's picture.(42) The fact that William Crimsworth, and not his brother, inherited his "aristocratic" mother's physical and moral qualities is significant. This not only suggests heritage and the importance of precedence, for the British, but also the value of reproduction and progeny within the same "species."

One of William Crimsworth's imperialistic trait *par excellence* certainly is his pedagogic mission. He speaks foreign languages and they serve them well to find a job in England. However, he goes to Brussels and becomes a teacher of English and therefore disseminator of English culture among French-speaking people. The teaching of language and Literature is instrumental for the success of cultural imperialism. In fact, by enculturating the other with his own culture, the master not only "silences" the other's language, but also erases his identity. In *The Professor*, the classroom is the place where Crimsworth exercises his power position. From that hierarchical stand, he teaches English language and literature to his French-speaking students. He tortures them, demanding perfect pronunciation and intonation from their readings, and considering them "mentally deficient" "if they fail to acquire proficiency in the pronunciation of English. "My God!," he complains, "how he did snuffle, snort, and wheeze! All he said was in his throat and nose, for it is thus the Flamands speak...whereat he looked...convinced...that he had acquired himself a real born and bred 'Anglais.'" With the same arrogance and scorn, he refers to how they "splutter, hiss and mumble" through their English reading lessons, and to their "short memories, dense intelligence, feeble reflective powers."(43) William Crimsworth's disgust at the incomprehensible gibberish in his students' readings parallels the Lintons', when they hear Heathcliff speak. The power play is obvious here. The English language is the means whereby Crimsworth and the Lintons display their strength and power to "subdue," to "silence" and render "invisible" the inferior other. Reading and speaking, both associated with pronunciation, link the articulation of proper (standard) English with the promulgation and maintenance of class hierarchies, which are then posited as "national" identity.

Criticism on the Brontë sisters has only started to consider their work outside its private realm. Whether to a lesser or greater extent, *Agnes Grey*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Professor*, and *Villette* certainly are highly autobiographical compositions. But this does not mean that they are void of broader social issues and political ideology. In fact, as the exploration of the five novels in this paper reflects, the thematic concerns of Anne, Emily and Charlotte Brontë go well beyond the romantic and pro-feminist reach that have been traditionally attributed to them. The existence of an explicit nationalistic language with which the three writers negotiate the major conflicts in their lives makes it possible to resituate their novels beyond the intensely private world of autobiography.

Notes

(1) This is a developed version of a draft delivered at a Doctoral Seminar on the Brontë sisters at Southern Illinois University –Carbondale (Illinois, USA), 2001.

- (2) Susan Meyer, *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women's Fiction* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1996) 6; emphasis mine.
- (3) Meyer 7-9; emphasis mine.
- (4) Meyer 7-11.
- (5) Anne Brontë, *Agnes Grey* (1847). Intro and notes by Angeline Goreau (England: Penguin, 1988); Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Ed. with an intro and notes by Pauline Nestor (England: Penguin, 1995); and Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor* (1857). Ed. with an intro and notes by Heather Glen (England: Penguin, 1989), *Jane Eyre*. Ed. with an intro and notes by Michael Mason (England: Penguin, 1996), and *Villette* (1853). Ed. by Mark Lilly with an intro by Tony Tanner (England: Penguin, 1979). References to these novels are all made to these editions.
- (6) Emphases are mine.
- (7) For further discussion on this topic, see Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated by John Cumming (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972).
- (8) Anne Brontë, *Agnes Grey* 62.
- (9) *Agnes Grey* 117, 118, and 139.
- (10) *Oxford Encyclopedia of World History*.
- (11) *Encyclopedia of World History*.
- (12) *Imperialism at Home 2*.
- (13) *Agnes Grey*, Introduction 39.
- (14) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 180.
- (15) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 13.
- (16) Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* 36-37; the emphasis is mine.
- (17) Susanne Everett, *The Slaves* (New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1978) 65.
- (18) *Wuthering Heights*, Introduction xxxiv.
- (19) *Wuthering Heights* 34.
- (20) *Wuthering Heights* 33-34.
- (21) *Wuthering Heights* 50.
- (22) Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (New York: Verso), 1995) 11.
- (23) Meyer 103, 107.
- (24) Meyer 23 and 64, respectively; emphases are mine.
- (25) Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*. Ed. by Mark Lilly with an intro by Tony Tanner (England: Penguin, 1997). All subsequent references to this novel correspond to this edition.
- (26) Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* 145.
- (27) *Jane Eyre* 327.
- (28) *Jane Eyre* 327-28; emphases are mine.
- (29) *Jane Eyre* 326-27.
- (30) Meyer 66.
- (31) Joyce Zonana, "The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of *Jane Eyre*" (*Signs* 18:3 Spring 1993) 579.
- (32) *Villette*, Chapter 1.
- (33) T.J. Wise and J.A.S. Symington, *The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence*, Vol. 1 (Oxford, 1932) 267.
- (34) *The Professor*, Introduction 13.
- (35) *The Professor* 39-46.
- (36) *Villette* 429 and 142, respectively.
- (37) *The Professor* 143.
- (38) *The Professor* 101, 127, and 131.
- (39) *Villette* 122, 195, and 579.
- (40) Meyer 15.
- (41) *Villette* 160 and 225, respectively.
- (42) *The Professor* 63, 57, and 235.
- (43) *The Professor* 94 and 98, respectively.

Works Cited

- ADORNO, Theodor and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Translated by John Cumming. New York: Herder & Herder, 1972.
- BRONTË, Anne. *Agnes Grey*. 1847. Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Angeline Goreau. England: Penguin, 1988.
- BRONTË, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Michael Mason. England: Penguin, 1996.
- _____. *The Professor*. 1857. Edited by Heather Glen. England: Penguin, 1989.
- _____. *Villette*. 1853. Edited by Mark Lilly with an Introduction by Tony Tanner. England: Penguin, 1979.
- BRONTË, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. 1847. Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Pauline Nestor. England: Penguin, 1995.
- EAGLETON, Terry. *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture*. New York: Verso, 1995.
- Encyclopedia of World History*. Compiled by Market House Books Ltd., New York: Oxford UP, 1998.
- EVERETT, Susanne. *The Slaves*. New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1978.
- MEYER, Susan. *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women's Fiction*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1996.
- STAFFORD, William. "John Stuart Mill: Critic of Victorian Values?" *In Search of Victorian Values*, ed. by Eric M. Sigsworth. Manchester, U.K.: Manchester UP, 1988.
- WISE, T.J. and J.A.S. Symington. *The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence*. Vol. I. Oxford, 1932.
- ZONANA, Joyce. "The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of Jane Eyre." *Signs* 18:3 (Spring 1993): 592-617