PARALLEL VISIONS

by Jonathan Cooper
A talk given to the ABA on 12th March 2022

I am not an expert in Charlotte Brontë, the Brontë sisters, or even literature. My field is art (and art museum education). I nevertheless believe that the intersection of two fields can produce something interesting and useful. I want to look at what happens when someone creates in more than one field, and see if there are parallels or overlaps. First, I want to briefly mention two people *other than* Charlotte Brontë, whose creative output was in more than one field.

Iannis Xenakis was a 20th century architect who composed music. In fact, Wikipedia describes him as a "Romanian-born Greek-French avant-garde composer, music theorist, architect, performance director and engineer". A common thread is mathematics. And, both music and architecture can create "space", and mood.

William Blake was an artist who wrote poetry (or alternatively, a poet who created paintings, engravings and etchings). Depending on how you look at it, he was either a precursor to the Romantics of the early to mid 19th century, or one of the very first Romantics. While Romanticism in art, music and literature was typically about feelings of the sublime – particularly in response to nature at its wildest – Blake's "Romanticism" was so idiosyncratic that his contemporaries generally regarded him as mad. For example, his illuminated books, like much of his creative output, read like the scriptures of some kind of new, esoteric religion.

Fig 1

And now we come to a writer who drew: Charlotte Brontë. Actually, according to Christine Alexander, "Charlotte thought of herself as a potential painter, not as a budding novelist."[1] Figure 1 shows a drawing by her, aged about 15, of her school. It is a competent and assured work, especially for one so young. For example, note the convincing perspective of the building. However, the plants along the lower edge don't really look to me like they

1 Christine Alexander, "Charlotte Brontë's Paintings: Victorian Women and the Visual Arts", in *Australian Academy of the Humanities, Proceedings* 18, 1993, p. 136

are part of the same space as the rest of the drawing. Rather, they appear more as an incomplete decorative border.

Figures 2 shows another of Charlotte's drawings, almost certainly from her imagination. Note, for example, the very strange anatomy, and how the lower arms "fade away", suggesting that she could not decide what to do with them.

Fig 2

Drawing was regarded as an appropriate and useful activity for a young lady (ie, a middle-class or wealthy young woman with time on her hands). Such women were expected to have "accomplishments", such as embroidery, music and drawing. Women were not expected to become professional artists, but to produce artwork as a constructive use of their leisure time, to decorate their homes, and to create gifts. So, Charlotte, Emily and Anne all drew, mainly by copying prints, but Charlotte had a special aptitude for it.

The origins of art

What we now call "art" (that is, the pictorial representation of the real world) is generally believed to have originated about forty to fifty thousand years ago, probably based on the belief that to represent something gives one power over it. However, there is a classical legend about how painting and drawing began. Pliny the Elder wrote (in *Natural History* c.78 BC)[2]:

"We have no certain knowledge as to the commencement of the art of painting... The Egyptians assert that it was invented among themselves, 6000 years before it passed into Greece; a vain boast, it is very evident. As to the Greeks, some say that it was invented at Sicyon, others at Corinth; but they all agree that it originated in tracing lines round the human shadow."

Later, he tells the story of Butades of Corinth:

"It was through his daughter that he made the discovery; she, being deeply in love with a young man about to depart on a long journey, traced the profile of his face, as thrown upon the wall by the light of the lamp."

The woman's father then pressed clay into the outline and made a relief sculpture. So, the woman was not just a copyist, but an *assistant* to a copyist. In other words, there were different expectations of male and female artists with

2 H. Rackham, trans., *Pliny: Natural History*, 10 vols (London: Heinemann, and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961), vol. 9

respect to copying versus originality, a prejudice that continued all the way to the 19th century, and perhaps even to the present day.

Figure 3 shows a pencil drawing by the 16 year old Charlotte, of the Lake District. However, it is not a scene that she observed directly. Rather, it is based on an engraving which was in turn based on a drawing. We can see that Charlotte's drawing is not an exact copy of the engraving. For example, it has a narrower tonal range, the bush in middle foreground is smaller, with no birds flying in front of it, it has fewer islands, and the ground along the right-hand end of the lower edge has been omitted.

Fig 3

On the other hand, we might assume that the original drawing was at least as the scene appeared to the *artist* (Thomas Allom). However, while he didn't copy another drawing or painting, it *was* based on a kind of formula, or "recipe": the picturesque (or classical) landscape.

Figure 4 shows the typical characteristics of a picturesque landscape: light-coloured mountains in the distance; water in the middle ground; the foreground is darker, except for tiny figures, who are engaged in non-strenuous activity; asymmetrically framing trees in the foreground; and the light and shadows show that it is almost evening. All this is designed for a domestic setting, to make the owner/viewer feel "relaxed and comfortable".

Fig 4

So far, so conventional. However, Charlotte Brontë revealed in her writing – especially her last novel, *Villette* – that she was at least intrigued by the *idea* of a woman trying to subvert expectations, and express her darker passions. Here is an excerpt from *Villette*, chapter 19, "The Cleopatra" (Lucy Snowe narrating):

> "One day, at a quiet early hour, I found myself nearly alone in a certain gallery, wherein one particular picture of portentous size, set up in the best light, having a cordon of protection stretched before it, and a cushioned bench duly set in front for the accommodation of worshipping connoisseurs, who,

having gazed themselves off their feet, might be fain to complete the business sitting: this picture, I say, seemed to consider itself the queen of the collection.

"It represented a woman, considerably larger, I thought, than the life. I calculated that this lady, put into a scale of magnitude, suitable for the reception of a commodity of bulk, would infallibly turn from fourteen to sixteen stone. She was, indeed, extremely well fed... She lay half-reclined on a couch: why, it would be difficult to say; broad daylight blazed round her... She, had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa. She ought likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly, which was not the case: out of abundance of material – seven-and-twenty yards, I should say, of drapery – she managed to make inefficient raiment. Then, for the wretched untidiness surrounding her, there could be no excuse. Pots and pans – perhaps I ought to say vases and goblets – were rolled here and there on the foreground; a perfect rubbish of flowers was mixed amongst them, and an absurd and disorderly mass of curtain upholstery smothered the couch and cumbered the floor. On referring to the catalogue, I found that this notable production bore the name 'Cleopatra'."[3]

As well as traditional artists such as Copley Fielding and Thomas Allom, Charlotte was also intrigued by contemporary artists of a more romantic, gothic persuasion, such as the Swiss-born painter, Henry Fuseli (Johann Heinrich Füssli, 1741–1825).

Figure 5 shows another painting by Fuseli, more melancholy than the melodramatic *Nightmare*. Charlotte did a drawing based on this image, but not directly. Instead, it was based on an engraving in a book.

Fig 5

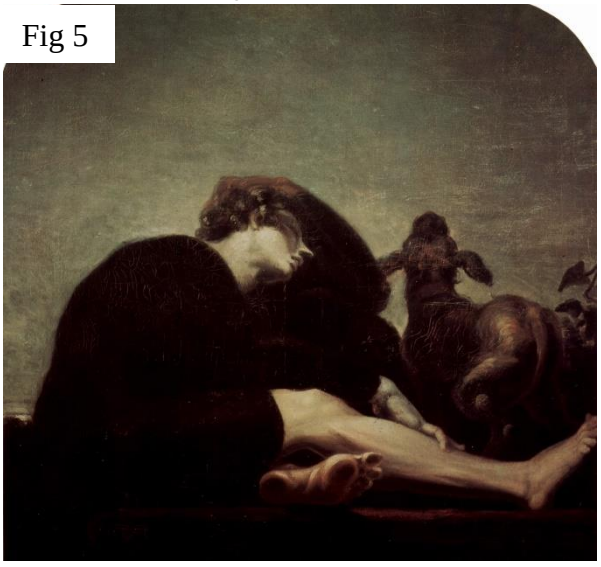


Fig 6

Notice how any anguish that the protagonist may have been feeling (or seen to be feeling) in Fuseli's original, has been considerably "smoothed away". And

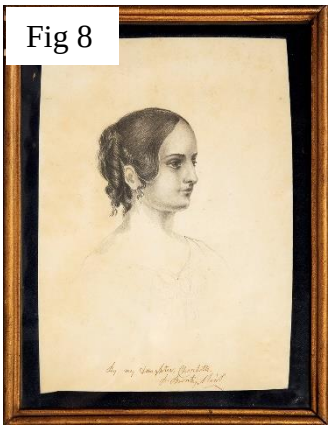
3 Charlotte Brontë (Currer Bell), *Villette*, Smith, Elder & Co, London, 1853, ch. 19

in Figure 6, we see Charlotte's version. From dark and gothic, we now have sweet and decorative.

Fig 7

Another artist whose work fascinated Charlotte Brontë was the English Romantic, John Martin (Figure7). I am not aware of any copies by Charlotte of John Martin's work, but I suppose it would be hard to sweeten a cataclysmic scene, such as the destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Fig 8



So, did Charlotte ever draw or paint from direct observation? Possibly the drawing in Figure 8, because it is a head and neck "floating" in the middle of a piece of paper, something that professional artists don't usually do[4]. There is one tiny detail that most people probably wouldn't notice, but which Charlotte did: the light reflected off the woman's clothing into the shadow of her jaw line.

Drawing

We have seen that Charlotte was expected, as a respectable middle-class young woman, to be competent at drawing. But, she clearly enjoyed it. So the question I would like to ask now is: "Why do people draw (and presumably enjoy it)?"

To many people, drawing is like magic, a special skill that only a few are born with. Yet it is a natural activity: as soon as we realise as children that we can leave a trace, in sand or on a foggy window, or wherever, we do. We don't particularly care that the result is impermanent. In fact, it can be extremely impermanent, such as drawing with sparklers at night. Drawing, at its essence, is a direct trace of movement. Sometimes we draw absent-mindedly, almost without realising, but we generally call that "doodling", not "drawing".

However, if drawing is so natural, so basic, why do most adults *not* do it? After all, we expect children to draw. What happens between childhood and adulthood?

4 However, the web page where I found this says "probably copied from an engraving".

There are six or seven generally accepted stages of development in drawing from toddlerhood to adolescence. At about age 2, a child will be making marks with little or no control ("scribbling"). Then, by about age 3, a child will have learnt to control the scribbling to a certain degree. Around age 4, meaning will be assigned to the marks (with encouragement from adults). Between the ages of about 6 and 8, a child will increasingly be able to use drawing to tell stories. At around age 10, complexity will have increased and towards the age of about 12, a child will attempt realism, as observed in the art of "talented" adults. At around age 14, there is usually a crisis, when the question is asked, "Are my drawings good enough?" If the answer is "No", a child will usually abandon drawing. But if the answer is "Yes" (and much depends on reactions from adults and older siblings), a child will probably continue to develop drawing skills.

I believe it is important for *everyone* to draw, because drawing teaches us to *see*.

If you are at all interested in drawing (even if you believe you can't draw), I highly recommend the book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain: how to unlock your hidden artistic talent*, by Betty Edwards.[5] Here is a very basic summary:

The brain has two sides, or hemispheres. The left side is logical, sequential, rational, analytical, objective, verbal, and looks at parts. The right side is intuitive, random, irrational, synthesising, subjective, nonverbal, and looks at wholes. These days, neuroscientists don't believe that there is such a direct and clear relationship between the two hemispheres of the brain and these two modes of thinking, but the general principle still applies. So, from now on, I will refer to them the **verbal** and **non-verbal** modes.

As a simple demonstration, draw six differently coloured blobs (say, green, red, blue, yellow, black and orange) on a piece of paper, then say their names out loud, one by one. Then, write the words "yellow", "blue", "orange", "black", "purple" and "green" in the same colours as the blobs (ie, green, red, blue, yellow, black and orange, respectively). Now, name the *colours* that the words are written in, out loud, one by one, *not* the words themselves. Did you notice a conflict going on in your mind? The verbal and non-verbal modes were fighting with each other. Drawing is inherently a non-verbal-mode activity, but when you are drawing, your verbal mode, which negotiates the world with names and labels, keeps wanting to take over. In an experiment, which has been repeated many times, Betty Edwards


Fig 9

5 The book has been updated a number of times since the first edition of 1979, and it is still in print. It has its own website: www.drawright.com

asked four junior high school students to draw a person from memory. Then students 1 and 2 were asked to copy a drawing (shown in Figure 9), and students 3 and 4 were asked to copy the same drawing, but *upside-down*. Figure 10 shows the results. The left column shows each student's drawing from memory and the right column, their copied drawing. You can see that students 1 and 2 struggled with the crossed legs and foreshortening when copying, whereas the copy-drawings of students 3 and 4 were much more accurate.

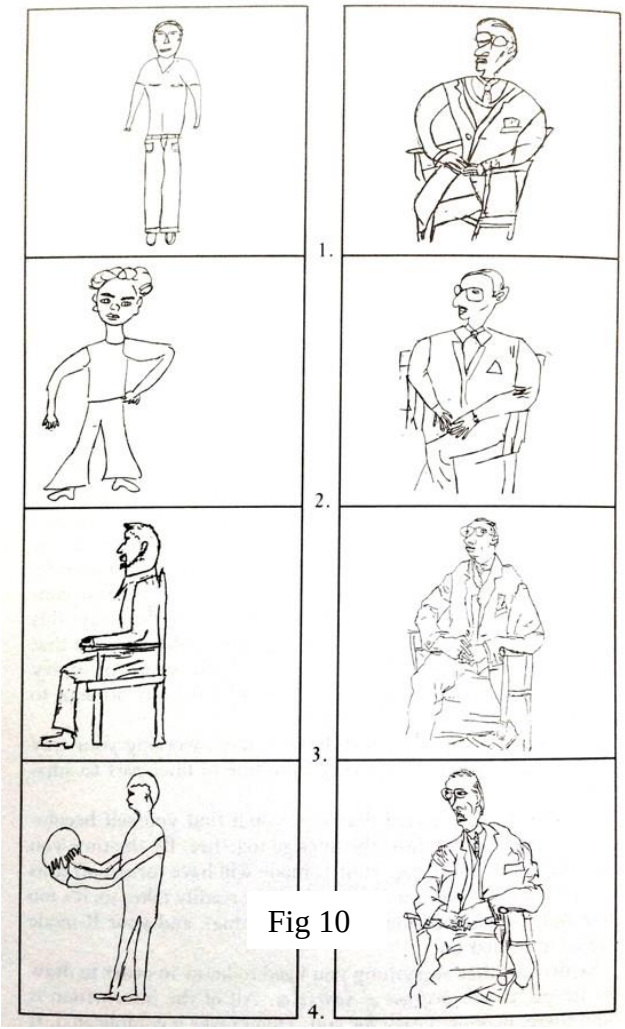


Fig 10

Betty Edwards explains it like this. Suppose you are trying to draw a chair. She writes:

> "The left hemisphere [the verbal mode] has no patience for this detailed perception and says, in effect, 'This is a chair, I tell you. That's enough to know. In fact, don't bother looking at it, because I have a symbol ready for you: here it is! Add a few details if you like, but don't bother me with this looking business.'"[6]

There are various exercises to encourage non-verbal-mode seeing and drawing. All involve tasks that the verbal mode is not good at or is not interested in – for example, blind contour drawing (where you draw something, looking only at the subject, not the paper), and drawing the spaces *between* objects, not the objects themselves.

The tension between the verbal and non-verbal modes of thinking parallels the tension between two ways of *seeing*, which I call "survival vision" and "aesthetic vision". Survival vision is what we use to navigate our way through the world without bumping into things, falling off cliffs and getting run over. Aesthetic vision is seeing things for the sheer pleasure of seeing, taking nothing for granted. In other words, seeing independently of what you "know".

6 Betty Edwards, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain: how to unlock your hidden artistic talent*, Fontana, 1982, p.77

Artists, and writers, often show us the familiar world as something wonderfully "unfamiliar".

Figure 11 shows a still life painting. What do we see? Three cups and saucers, two glasses – one with a cut lemon in water, the other with sugar cubes – and a jug. That's survival vision. Now find the five shapes in Figure 18 in the same painting. (Hint: they are not to scale and are not necessarily black on white.) That's aesthetic vision.

Fig 11

Artists, like writers, sometimes bend the truth to make something more "satisfying". For example, can you find at least two things in Figure 11 that show that the artist valued composition more than realism? (Hint: they both indirectly involve the jug.)

Writers use a kind of aesthetic vision when they describe a scene (as Charlotte did in *Villette*), or when they ask us, in effect, "Have you ever thought how a situation like this could have consequences like that?"

What is art?

Earlier, we stepped back from the drawings of Charlotte Brontë to look at drawing in general. Now let's step back even further and ask the big question: "What is art?"

You, and maybe Charlotte Brontë, might answer: "It's representing the real world" (although photography does that now). Perhaps the answer is "personal expression"? Another way to express the question is: "What is art *for*? What does it *do*?"

(Before we go on, we should distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic aims. Extrinsic aims are those that could be just as valid for non-artistic matters, eg, to make money, to achieve fame and, adulation, or to assist the dead in the afterlife.) So we are only interested in the *intrinsic* reasons that artists create art. Why are the paintings of the Dutch 17th century artist, Johannes Vermeer (eg, Figure 12), so revered? Their realism? The depiction of light? The subtle and intriguing stories? Maybe, but what about *other* Dutch 17th century painters, such as Pieter de Hooch? The painting in Figure 13 certainly has much to interest us: domestic activity, a cute child, a glimpse of the street outside, reflections in the glass, other artworks, furniture and costumes of the period, and a staircase. It also has convincing realism, including the depiction of light, and many fine details.

Fig 12

However, compared to Vermeer's painting, de Hooch's seems busy and cluttered. The main reason why Vermeer is still so highly regarded is his mastery of composition, that is, the seemingly effortless way that elements have been placed one against the other, which gives his paintings their sense of quiet perfection.

Of course, Vermeer's paintings *are* great examples of realist art. So, yes, he was aiming to represent the visible world. But, as we saw, his art is as much about composition, about creating an aesthetically pleasing object. Similarly, van Gogh was responding to a visual experience when he painted *The starry night*, but his imaginative depiction of the scene, particularly the swirling sky, shows that he was prepared to sacrifice a certain amount of visual realism for the sake of emotional impact.

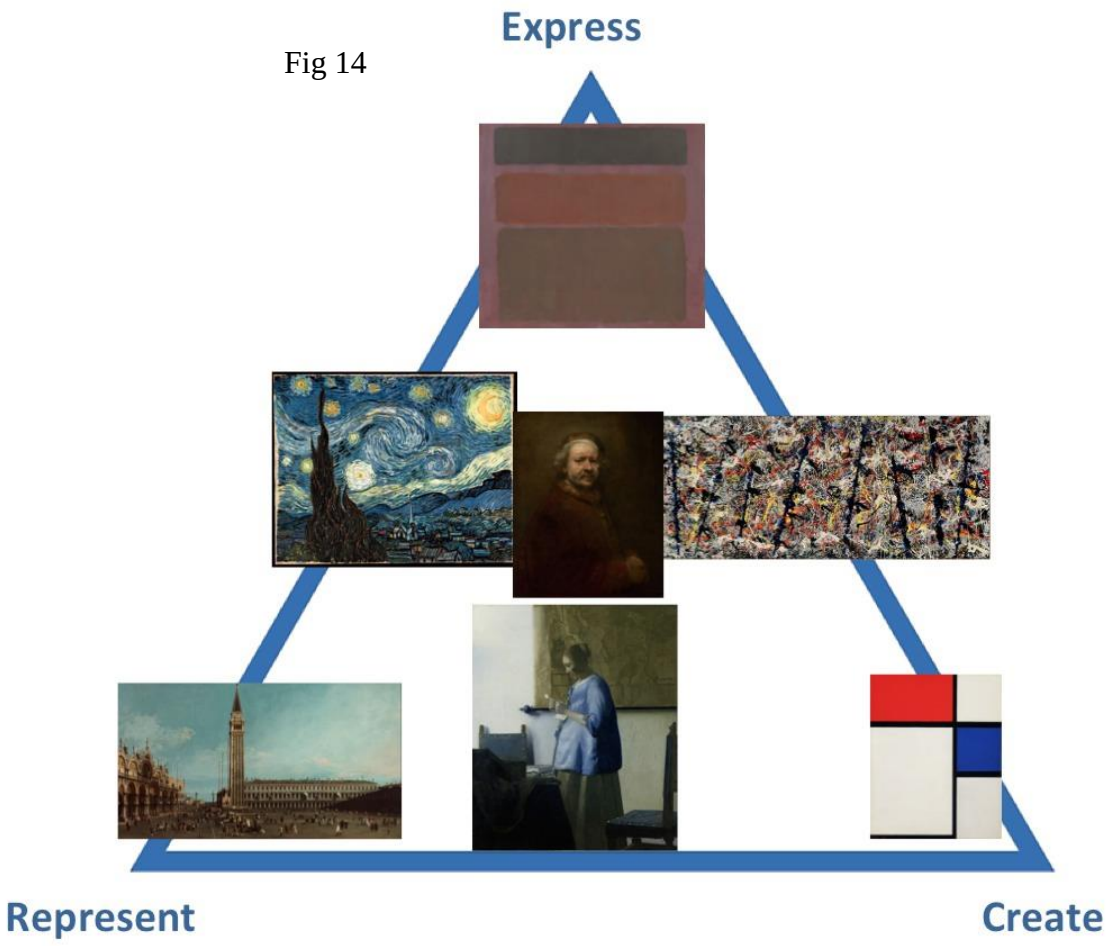
Fig 13

So, art can be for:

- CREATING aesthetically pleasing objects, and/or
- REPRESENTING the visible world, and/or
- EXPRESSING emotions.

In fact, most artists do all three to varying degrees. You might find it useful to imagine various artworks placed in a triangle, with each corner representing one of these elemental aims (Figure 14).

Fig 14



When Canaletto painted a picture of the square of San' Marco, Venice, his main purpose was to describe it as clearly and precisely as possible. Yes, he was also aware of the importance of composition. And he probably wanted us to feel excited about the place and the shimmering Venetian light. But for the most part, Canaletto was interested in representing the visible world. So, that's why I placed his painting very close to the "Represent" corner.

Piet Mondrian, in his later career, didn't want to be distracted by the visual details of the world around him. He also wasn't interested in "venting his emotions". Instead, he wanted to create a kind of distillation of the universe, using minimal artistic tools: primary colours, black and white, interlocking rectangles and, above all, proportion. But even a "distillation" of the world must retain *some*

of the world. And the thoughtful, almost mystical state of mind that Mondrian felt while he painted (and which he hoped his audience would also feel) is a kind of emotion. But for the most part, he was interested in the creation of an object for contemplation. So I placed Mondrian's painting very close to the "Create" corner.

Mark Rothko, like Mondrian, was not interested in visual detail. But, by concentrating on colour, rather than geometry and proportion, he showed that he wanted a direct, *emotional* response. So, although the colours might remind us of something, and although his paintings are very harmonious, Rothko was mainly interested in the expression of emotion. So I placed this Mark Rothko painting very close to the "Express" corner.

Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* is as non-representational as a Mondrian. But, unlike Mondrian, its creation was a very physical affair. Pollock applied the paint by flicking, dripping and squirting, as he moved over the large canvas spread out on the floor. While it is hard to attach a particular feeling to the finished artwork, the connection between "motion" and "emotion" is not accidental. This is why this style is usually referred to as "abstract expressionism". So I placed this Pollock painting half-way between the "Express" and "Create" corners.

There are many artists whose artworks would show more or less *equal* amounts of all three intrinsic purposes, but one of greatest is Rembrandt. So, I placed Rembrandt's self-portrait in the centre of the triangle.

I am not dogmatic about the particular works illustrated in Figure 14, but I believe that the general principle is valid. So, next time you look at an artwork, imagine asking the artist: "What were you trying to achieve here? Were you trying to **describe** something as accurately as possible? Were you trying to **express** emotions, or elicit emotions in the viewer? Were you trying to **create** something pleasing to the eye?"

Could this model have parallels with the aims of narrative writing? As I said, I am in no way an expert in literature, but the equivalent model might be a triangle with the three corners as follows:

- About description and observation (Naturalism)
- About expression and emotional truth (Romanticism)
- About the craft of writing itself, such as wordplay, experimental plot construction, and speculative fiction

Where would *you* put Charlotte Brontë?

Chaos and order

So, if we could answer the question about a particular artist, "What would this artist say is the purpose of art?", we would go part of the way to defining that

artist's style. We would have an answer to the "why?", but not necessarily the "how?"

Imagine you and I are in an art gallery. I have decided to create a work of art for the gallery by tipping a box of junk upside-down onto the floor (Figure 15). If I left it there, just as the pieces landed, and came back a day later, do you think it would still be there? No? Why not? Who would have taken it away? Not the director, nor the curators, but the cleaner. The cleaner must decide whether it looks like it is *meant* to be there. So, to be seen as "art", my work needs "meantness".

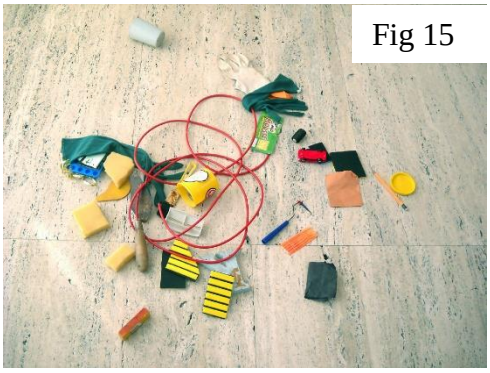


Fig 15

A frame can help an artwork's "meantness", because it contains the objects, and acts like a fence separating the "art" from the "non-art". A label could also help. But an artwork really needs more, such as arrangement, selection or repetition. One way to give an artwork "meantness" could be to organise the pieces into a grid of rows and columns (Figure 16). I could even group objects that have the same basic colour, or shape. What I have started to do is turn chaos into order.

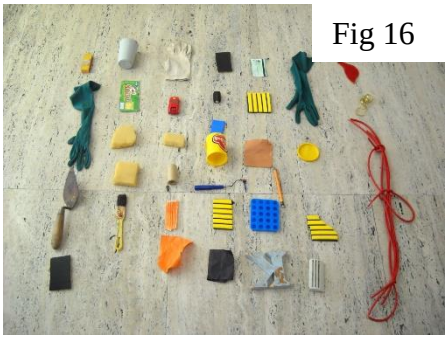


Fig 16

An interesting approach using geometry is to use the golden rectangle (GR)[7]. One of the characteristics of a GR is that, if you remove a square from one end, you are left with a smaller GR. If you were to draw a square to fill the bottom of this painting, the crown, and the shelf it sits on, would lie on the top of the square.

Tom Roberts' painting shows an entirely different approach. By choosing to paint a landscape in fog, the artist has made elements that would have otherwise competed with each other seem to partly merge, and edges and details, to blur. The equivalent for my junk on the gallery floor might be to lay bubble-wrap over it (Figure 17).

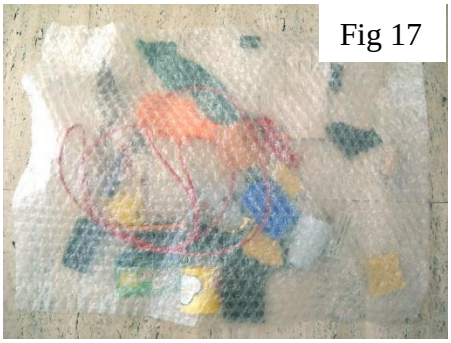


Fig 17

To summarise, artists start with the chaos of the real world and try to unify the disparate parts, to reduce the chaos. But, they

7 The sides of any golden rectangle are always in the ratio of $1+\sqrt{5}:2$ (or approximately 1.618:1), also known as the golden ratio. If you were to divide a line segment into two smaller (unequal) segments so that the longer length divided by the shorter length was the golden ratio, the whole length divided by the longer length would *also* be the golden ratio.

don’t want to eliminate *all* the chaos, because that would make the artwork boring. So, they try to follow two basic, complementary rules:

1. Don’t confuse the viewer (ie, reduce chaos), but
2. Don’t bore the viewer (ie, reduce predictability).

Artists try to *balance* unity and interest. So, here is a final question to consider: How does a *writer*, such as Charlotte Brontë, balance unity and interest?

Illustrations & captions

Fig 1: Charlotte Brontë, *The Roe Head School*, c.1831–32, inscribed by Patrick Brontë: “By my D[ea]r Daughter Charlotte / P Bronté Min[iste]r of Haworth”. Brontë Parsonage Museum

Fig 2: Charlotte Brontë (age 13), *Lady Jephia Bud*, 1829. The Morgan Library & Museum

Fig 3: Charlotte Brontë (age 16), *Derwent Water in the Lake District*, 1832, based on an engraving by S Lacey of a drawing by Thomas Allom

Fig 5: Henry Fuseli, *The loneliness at daybreak (Lycidas)*, no date. Kunsthaus Zürich

Fig 6: Charlotte Brontë (age 18), *Lycidas*, 1835, copied from a print after painting by Henry Fuseli. Brontë Parsonage Museum

Fig 7: John Martin, *The destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum*, 1822, Tate Britain

Fig 8: Charlotte Brontë, [an unnamed woman], no date

Fig 9: Pablo Picasso, *Portrait of Igor Stravinsky*, 1920. Private collection

Fig 10: The effects of upside-down drawing

Fig 11: Margaret Preston, *Implement blue*, 1927. AGNSW

Fig 12: Johannes Vermeer, *Woman reading a letter*, c.1663. Rijksmuseum

Fig 13: Pieter de Hooch, *Interior with women beside a linen cupboard*, 1663. Rijksmuseum

Fig 14: Triangle of art aims. Art works: Figures 19–21, plus:
Canaletto, *The Piazza San’ Marco, Venice*, 1742-46. AGNSW
Piet Mondrian, *Composition no. II, with red and blue*, 1929. MOMA, New York
Mark Rothko, *No. 16 (red, brown, and black)*, 1958. MOMA, New York
Jackson Pollock, *Blue poles*, 1952. NGA, Canberra
Rembrandt, *Self portrait at the age of 63*, 1669. National Gallery, London

Fig 15: Junk on the floor of the Art Gallery of NSW

Fig 16: Junk arranged in a grid

Fig 17: Junk under bubble-wrap

HOW TO BE A GOOD WIFE: CHAROTTE BRONTË AND CHARLES DICKENS

A talk written by Alison Hoddinott and read by Michelle Cavanagh and Catherine Barker to the ABA on 14th May 2022

In 1853 two great Victorian novels were published in book form, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and Charles Dickens '*Bleak House*. *Villette* was published on January 28th by Smith Elder & Co while *Bleak House* was published later in the same year by Bradbury & Evans. This is however a little misleading. Dickens published all his novels in serial form and *Bleak House* was serialised from March 1852 till September 1853, so Charlotte Brontë was able to read the first number. At the time she was wrestling with the writing of *Villette* and her publishers were waiting impatiently for it. She wrote to George Smith about her reaction to her reading for the first number of Dickens novel shortly after it was published:

> *Is the first number of Bleak House generally admired? I liked the Chancery part, but when it passes into the autobiographical form and the young woman who announces that she is not bright begins her history, it seems to me too often weak and twaddling; an amiable nature is caricatured, not faithfully rendered in Miss Esther Summerson. (11/3/1852)*

My argument in this paper is that much of the portrait of Lucy Snowe, the narrator of *Villette*, is an attempt to correct the 'caricature 'of the portrait of Esther Summerson, one of the two narrators of *Bleak House*, by giving a portrait of a 'real 'woman. Lucy Snowe is, in many respects, a portrait of Charlotte Brontë.

Charlotte Brontë was opposed to the serial or progressive publication of her own novels. As early as September 1851 (i.e. before she had made the comment about the first number of *Bleak House*) she had written to George Smith in response to his letter asking her to consider serial publication for her next novel:

> *I ought not to forget, and indeed have not forgotten, that your last propounds to this same Currer Bell a question about a 'serial'. My dear Sir, give Currer Bell the experience of a Thackeray or the animal spirit of a Dickens, and then repeat the question. Even then he would answer, 'I will publish no serial of which the last number is not written before the first comes out.*

Currer Bell was the non-sexual pseudonym under which she had published and achieved such phenomenal success with *Jane Eyre*. George Smith was well aware

that she was a woman since she had spent much of the previous summer at the home of him and his mother in London.

A week after she had written to George Smith expressing her reaction to the first number of *Bleak House,* and in particular, her reaction to the portrait of Esther Summerson, she wrote to Miss Margaret Wooler declining with regret her invitation to come to her for a short holiday and expressing her intention to get down at last to the writing of *Villette*:

> *For nearly four months now (i.e. since I first became ill) I have not put pen to paper – my work has been lying untouched and my faculties have been rusting for want of exercise; further relaxation is out of the question and I will not permit myself to think of it. My publisher groans over my long delays; I am sometimes provoked to check the expression of his impatience with short and crusty answers.*

The illness from which she had been suffering over the winter (headaches, loss of weight, depression) was the result of the deaths of her brother and two sisters - Branwell, Emily and Anne - within a year of one another in the winter and spring of 1848-1849. Anne's death bed had in fact come between the writing of the second and third volumes of *Shirley*.

Dickens (b. 1812) married young, at aged twenty four. Charlotte Brontë (b. 1816) married when she was thirty seven. Both, at the time of writing *Bleak House* and *Villette,* were preoccupied with the question of marriage and the qualities of a good wife, but in very different ways. A the time of the publication of the first number of *Bleak House*, Catherine Dickens had given birth to their tenth and final child and Dickens subsequently had the wall between his bedroom and hers closed and replaced by book shelves. Charlotte Brontë was desperately lonely without her siblings and she accepted the proposal of her father's curate, Arthur Bell Nicholls, promising to make him "a good wife." Nine months later, she was dead during the resultant pregnancy. (The doctor described the pregnancy as a "natural event".) Both were concerned with the qualities that constitute good wifehood.

Dickens '*Bleak House* is written as coming from two narrators. The first is told in the present tense by a narrator who depicts London as the heart of an England which is submerged in fog and mud, and at the centre of which sits the Lord High Chancellor of the Court of Chancery "with a foggy glory round his head". The second narrator tells the story of her life in the past tense until her happy marriage to Dr. Allan Woodcourt. The first narrator begins the story and Esther concludes it, implying, presumably, a slender hope for the future, which is based on the qualities that she has displayed. Charlotte Brontë approved of "the Chancery part", but she wrote her novel *Villette* from the point of view of the narrator Lucy

Snowe – a character who would give her readers a more accurate depiction of womanhood than a mere caricature Dickens portrayed which was both "weak and twaddling".

The choice of names for the main characters was particularly important for Victorian novelists. Charlotte Brontë said of her character "a cold name she must have" and the choice of that cold name was dictated by opposition to the name of Esther Summerson, who brings the sun of summer with her, whether she goes.

Charlotte originally chose the name Snowe for Lucy, her narrator. She subsequently changed it to Frost, and then, when the novel was actually being prepared for publication, she asked that, "if it is not too late, could it be changed back to Snowe again?"

Snowe-Frost? What is the difference? Frost is clearly harder than Snowe, which is more subtle and softer than frost. To complete the quotation, Charlotte said of her character, "A cold name she must have, for there is about her an external of coldness." Lucy constantly speaks of a war within her between a socially imposed coldness and self control and the feeling and passion which represent her true nature. She represents the image of fire for these repressed inner feelings. Several times she speaks of the complexity of her nature.

To Mrs Bretton, her godmother, she is always "steady little Lucy". To Mr Horne, she is "quietly pleased, so little moved, so content". To Ginevra Fanshawe, she is cynical, a sort of Timon of Athens, always repressive and critical. To Paulina, she is a confidante. Yet she is always Lucy. Only Paul Emanuel sees the passion behind her quiet exterior. She needs to be "kept down". He sees her in a red dress, when it is only pink.

Lucy's complexity is clearly based on Charlotte Brontë's own nature and on the first requirement of a "good wife", self control. Lucy constantly speaks of a war within between the socially imposed coldness and the feeling and passion which represent her true nature. In her letters, in her twenties, in which she reflects the proposal of Henry Nussey, Ellen Nussey's brother, we see the contrast between what he sees and what she is really like:

> *As for me, you do not know. I am not the serious, grave, cool headed individual you suppose; you would think me romantic and eccentric; you would say I was satirical and severe. However, I scorn deceit and I will never for the sake of escaping the stigma of an old maid, take a worthy man whom I am conscious I cannot render happy. (5/3/1839)*

A week later, she wrote to Ellen explaining further her refusal of Ellen's brother's proposal:

… I asked myself two questions: Do I love him as much as a woman ought to love the man she marries? Am I the person best qualified to make him happy? Alas, Ellen, my conscience answered no to both these questions. Moreover I was aware that Henry knew so little of me he could hardly be conscious to whom he was writing. Why, it would startle him to see me in my natural home character; he would think I was a wild romantic enthusiast indeed. I could not sit all day long making a grave face before my husband. I would laugh and satirise and say whatever came into my head first.

Frequently in her letters to Ellen Nussey she writes that despite her passionate, romantic nature, she was unlikely to marry and that she was reconciled to her single state. After the deaths of Branwell, Emily and Anne, her letters become more concerned with loneliness. To W S Williams, one of the editors of Smith Elder, & Co, she wrote in response to his letter congratulating her on the success of *Jane Eyre* and saying that one of his daughters was about to go to college:

Lonely as I am – how should I be if Providence had not given me courage to adopt a career. (3/4/1849)

To Amelia Ringrose (who was about to be married to Joseph Taylor) she writes a warning:

I think it would be very dreadful to take the most important, the most irrevocable step in life under the influence of illusive impressions – and when it was too late to retreat to find all was a mistake. (16/3/1850)

And she later compares the unhappy marriage of Amelia Taylor (who had, in the mean time, despite her warning, married Joseph Taylor, Mary's brother) with the single independent blessedness of Mary in New Zealand where she was running a shop and attempting to write a novel (*Miss Miles*), originally published in 1890 and later republished in 1991.

To Ellen Nussey she wrote that the choice of a husband was usually dictated by considerations "of convenience, of connection, of money." (20/1/1851) And again she wrote to Ellen:

The evils that now and then wring a groan from my heart – lie in position – not that I am a single woman and likely to remain a single woman – but because I am a lonely woman and likely to be lonely. But it cannot be helped and imperatively must be borne. (25/5/1852)

In fact, Charlotte was considerably more attractive than her letters suggest. In all, she received four, and possibly five, proposals of marriage. I have spoken of the first – Henry Nussey. The second shortly afterwards in 1839 was from someone who had met her for only one evening when she had displayed the witty amusing

satirical side of her nature to an Irish curate, who immediately made a proposal of marriage by letter. This offer was also refused.

But to revert to the later period when Charlotte was writing *Villette*. I have said that Victorian novelists took great care with the names of their major characters. Charles Dickens chose the name of Esther Summerson most appropriately. Her name Summer Sun is significant to her role in the novel as a whole for the future of England depends on the dispersal of the fog and rain and the drying of the mud that extends from London to the aristocracy at Chesney Wold and to Mr Rouncewell, the ironmaster in the north.

Esther's first name in *Bleak House* is equally important. The book of Esther in the Old Testament narrate the story of King Ahasuerus (whose kingdom extended "from India even unto Ethiopia") and his two marriages. Esther is of course the heroine of the story, as the naming of the book suggests. Esther was his second and more obedient wife. The first, Vashti, had been set aside for disobedience. Esther is the saviour of her people. In the biblical version, she saves the Jews. Esther in the Old Testament was brought up by her Uncle Mordecai "for she had neither father nor mother, and the maid was fair and beautiful." Not only fair and beautiful, she is modest and submissive. She obeys her Uncle Mordecai's instruction to conceal her Jewishness and, subsequently, he tells her to petition the king about a plot Mordecai has heard of "to destroy, to slay and to cause perish" to the Jewish people. She triumphs!

Such is the hope that creates the portrait of Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*, who similarly presents the possible salvation of the English people of the Victorian Age, sunk in mud and enveloped by rain.

Esther in *Bleak House* is not clever, but she is a good housekeeper. She several times assures us of this. She is gentle, modest, self sacrificing and thinks constantly of others. She is always busy and is given the housekeeping keys on arrival at Bleak House. Mr Jarndyce calls her 'Little woman, Dame Durden, Dame Trot 'and says 'You will sweep them so neatly out of our sky in the course of your housekeeping, Esther, '

The chaos of Mrs Jellyby's household, which is described early in Esther's narrative in *Bleak House* is significant in that it is designed to show the opposite of Esther's virtues. Mrs Jellyby can see nothing closer than Boorioboola-Gha and the plight of the natives she is attempting to civilise while her own family is desperately in need of her attention. In Esther's room, the curtain 'was fastened up with a fork and at dinner 'the dish of potatoes 'was 'mislaid in the coal scuttle ' and there were 'four envelopes in the gravy at once'. Here one thinks of poor Catherine, Dickens 'wife. He was, his biographer Edgar Johnson tells us,

compulsively tidy and from the beginning he mocked Catherine's untidiness. The untidiness of Mrs Jellyby's reflects his attitude, even the portrait of Mr Jellby who despairingly leans his head against the wall.

The choice of the name Vashti was obviously influenced by Dickens 'choice of Esther for the first name of Miss Summerson. But to return to Charlotte Brontë's selection of the name 'Vashti 'for the actress who so impressed her on her visit to London in the summer of 1851. I will read first from the biblical account of Ahasuerus first wife's disobedience and the reaction of the king:

King Ahasuerus made a feast unto all the people (last for seven days)

"On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine" he commanded his seven chamberlains "to bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal to show the people and the princes her beauty; for she was fair to look on"

But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment … therefore was the king's very wroth and his anger burned in him.

What shall we do unto the queen Vashti according to law because she hath not performed the commandment of the king…

Vashti the queen hath not alone wrong to the king only, but also to all the princes and to all the people…

For this deed of the queen shall come abroad unto all women, so that they shall despise their husbands in their eyes, when it shall be reported…

If it please the king, let there go a royal commandment from him, and let it be written among the laws to Persians and the Medes, that it be not altered, that Vashti come no more before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her real estate unto another that is better than she.

And when the king's decree… shall be published… all the wives shall give to their husbands honour, both to great and small

And the saying pleased the king …

For he sent letters… that every man should bear rule in his own house, and that it should be published according to the language of every people.

As a result, Vashti was set aside and ‘fair young virgins ’were sought for the king’s second wife, from whom Esther was selected.

During her 1851 visit to London to stay with George Smith and his mother, Charlotte had visited the theatre twice and there saw the French actress Rachel in her role as Camille in Corneille’s tragedy *Les Horaces*. She wrote to Sydney Dobell as she was leaving town:

> *Thackeray and Rachel have been the two points of attraction for me in town: the one being a human creature, great, interesting and sometimes good and kind: the other, I know not what, I think a demon. I saw her in Adrienne Lecouvieur and in Camilla – in the last character I shall never forget her – she will come to me in sleepless nights again and yet again. Fiends can hate, scorn, rave, writhe, and agonise as she does, not mere men and women. I neither love, esteem, nor admire this strange being but (if I could bear the high mental stimulus so long) I would go every night for three months to watch and study its manifestations.*

In *Villette* Lucy goes to the theatre, accompanied by Dr John. There she sees “Vashti torn by seven devils; devils which cried sore and rent the tenement they haunted, but still refused to be exorcised.”

> *… as the action rose and the stir deepened, how wildly they shook her with their passions of the pit! They wrote HELL on her strait haughty brow. They turned her voice to the note of torment. They writhed her regal face to a demoniac mask. Hate and Murder and Madness incarnate, she stood. It was a marvellous sight: a mighty revelation. It was a spectacle low, horrible, immoral.*

In other words, the spectacle of the actress Rachel haunted Charlotte Brontë. She was unsure about the morality of the display, but she would go every night for three months to witness it and study its manifestations. The role the actress portrayed was a strange being; capable of intense passion and Charlotte put her at the centre of her novel and gave her the name Vashti, the disobedient first wife of King Ahasuerus.

In the middle pages of the novel *Villette* the chapter headed ‘Vashti’, Lucy decides that she has nothing in common with Dr John. When she asks him how he liked Vashti, he replies only “Hm-m-m” with “a smile so critical, so almost callous!...”

> *Dr John could think, and think well, but he was rather a man of action than of thought, he could feel, and feel vividly in his way, but his heart had no chord for enthusiasm.*

Fire (symbolic of Vashti's acting and an image for passion) breaks out in the theatre. Dr John rescues Paulina, the ideal wife for him.

George Smith, a publisher, not a medical doctor had however recognised himself in the portrait of Dr John and was expecting that Lucy would end up married to him. He could not complain that Charlotte's intention had not been made clear to him. He had read the first two volumes and was expecting the third when Charlotte wrote to him on 3/11/1852:

> *Most of the third volume is given to the development of the 'crabbed Professor's 'character. Lucy must not marry Dr John; he is a 'curled darling 'of Nature and of Fortune and must draw a prize in life's lottery. His wife must be young, rich, pretty; he must be made very happy indeed. If Lucy marries anybody it must be the Professor – a man in whom there is much to forgive, much to put up with.*

George Smith paid Charlotte Brontë less than she was expecting and said that he would answer no more questions about the third volume of *Villette.*

The 'crabbed Professor', a man who is quick tempered, conceited, generous and gentle is clearly the soul mate of Lucy who is similarly complex. He is the one who sees the passion underlying the cold controlled exterior.

Whether she marries him at the end is, as Charlotte Brontë herself pointed out 'a riddle'. But it is a riddle to which it is not difficult to provide an answer. Lucy has lived to a great age. Her hair is now as white as her name. Paul Emanuel was drowned at sea. Charlotte Brontë makes this quite clear in her commentary just before she goes to be a companion to Miss Marchmont. She speaks to her 'bereaved lot 'of a 'storm', of a long time, of cold, of danger of contention". She speaks too of the necessity to earn her living. She allows sweet-tempered beings to imagine a happier reality. Similarly at the end of *Villette* she leaves 'sunny imaginations hope'. But she knows that there is a darker and more complex truth. Not every story has a happy ending and similarly every woman is not as virtuous and self-sacrificing as Esther Summerson.

Dickens was born in 1812 and married Catherine on 2/4/1836 when he was twenty four years old and Catherine was only twenty – therefore a special licence was necessary giving her father's consent to the marriage. He was already pleased by the reception of his *Sketches by_Boz* and quickly took the dominant role in their relationship. Already during their courtship and engagement he had, as his biographer Edward Johnson points out, "speedily reduced Catherine to the position of pleading to be forgiven for her exhibitions of ill-humour."

Her exhibitions of ill-humour were due to his neglect of her in favour of his ambition to succeed as a great writer and his ideal picture of womanhood. Her sixteen year old sister Mary, who adored him, became a permanent member of the household from the beginning of the marriage, and, after her unexpected death at the age of seventeen, his idealisation of her becomes excessive. She was the wife he never had and his idea of what a woman should be. She was "young, beautiful and good" as the inscription on her tombstone, composed by Dickens himself, points out. He wore her ring until he died. Writing to her mother thanking her for a lock of Mary's hair, he wrote of "her sweetness and excellence" and could

> *Solemnly say that, waking or sleeping, I have never lost the recollection of our hard trial and sorrow, and I feel that I never shall…*

He simply did not understand the complexity of women and his idealisation of Mary was partly because she was dead and therefore could not change and partly because she had adored him.

> *Thank God she died in my arms, and the very last words she whispered were of me … I solemnly believe that so perfect a creature never breathed. I knew her utmost heart, and her real worth and value. She had not a fault.*

The portrait of Esther in Bleak House is based on the recollection of Mary's perfection and helps explain the proposal of Mr Jarndyce to Esther years before Dickens had met Ellen Ternan. He always retained the ideal of Mary's faultlessness and transferred it to the characters of his many novels.

Poor Catherine. She suffered a miscarriage as a result of Mary's death, but that was just the lot of many women. In 1857, two years after Charlotte Brontë's death, Dickens finally separated from his wife with whom he had lived for many years. His relationship with Ellen Ternan (Nelly) who was eighteen years old at the time – slightly older than his daughter Katey – has frequently been blamed for his separation from his wife. It is more probable that the idealisation of Mary, who died at seventeen, was the root cause of his reverential attitude to virtuous, young, beautiful women.

However, I can never read, in Edgar Johnson's otherwise excellent biography, passages referring to the birth of Edward their final child of the marriage who was always known as Plorn without indignation:

> *It is true that in fifteen years Catherine had give birth to ten children and suffered a number of miscarriages. But physically her health was good, and she survived her more vigorous husband by nine years. And many*

Victorian wives has quite as many children as Catherine Dickens did and continued to be lively companions to their husbands.

Charlotte Brontë in *Villette* gives the reader a quite different picture of Victorian womanhood in Lucy Snowe. Charlotte was born in 1816 and died in 1855 at the age of thirty nine while pregnant with her first child. She had been married for only nine months. I have already spoken of her first two proposals of marriage, when she was in her twenties. After the success of *Jane Eyre*, and, to a lesser extent, *Shirley*, she was romantically involved with two of her publishers at Smith Elder & Co.

First was George Smith – the senior partner – who took her to Edinburgh – and who was the recognisable model for Dr John (John Graham Bratton) and with whom she stayed in London, and who may or may not have made a formal proposal of marriage. However her father was sufficiently alarmed by the excursion to Edinburgh to be sure that she was about to be married. He was prepared to go into lodgings if the rumour were true.

'The little man 'who had proposed marriage to Charlotte was another one of her publishers from Smith Elder – James Taylor (no relation to her friend Mary Taylor). Her serious letter at the beginning of February 1851 was on the question of atheism:

It is the first exposition of avowed Atheism and Materialism I have ever read; the first unequivocal declaration of disbelief in the existence of a Good or a Future Life I have ever seen.

She received a satisfactory reply, but not before being informed by George Smith that he was opening a brand of his publication firm in India and that James Taylor had been chosen to go there.

Patrick Brontë, Charlotte's father, was deeply disappointed that she would not marry either of her publishers. He liked James Taylor and considered that marriage to him after a separation of five years would be the most suitable. Accordingly he was outraged by the proposal of his curate, Arthur Bell Nicholls, and accepted the marriage with great reluctance. Charlotte married Arthur on 29/6/54 and died nine months later when only thirty nine year old.

So – what did it require in the Victorian novel to be a good wife? Since the beginning of the twentieth century we have become accustomed to seeing everything in terms of sex and sexual desire. It is the prism with which we see the past. The obedient housewife who acknowledged her husband as the head of the household is no more. The greatest social change has been the discovery and release of the pill to control a woman's body and its capacity for child bearing.

Charlotte Brontë died at thirty nine while Charles Dickens separated from his wife after she had born him ten children. There was plenty of sexual activity in Victorian England, but it is implied rather than stated specifically in the Victorian novel. The good wife was obedient, humbled, good-humoured, and above all, a good housekeeper. Esther Summerson represents Dickens 'ideal of womanhood, but Lucy Snowe is the true forerunner of twentieth century woman and her depiction in the twentieth century novel.

THE HEART AND THE PEN: JANE AUSTEN, THE BRONTËS, AND THE CHOICES THEY MADE

by Rachel Givney

A talk given to the ABA on 9th July 2022

In my novel, *Jane in Love*, Jane Austen time-travels to the present day and falls in love with a modern-day man. Jane Austen in her real life never married or had any children: it's a grand irony of literature, that the woman who wrote six of the most famous novels about love, died a spinster. So, in *Jane in Love*, when this fictional Jane Austen travels to the present, and falls in love with a modern-day man, she finds herself so happy in the 21st century that she decides to stay. As soon as she does this, her books begin disappearing from the shelves. She realises: the longer she stays in the 21st century, the more of her books will disappear until eventually, she will erase herself from history. Ultimately, she must decide between staying in the present, where she's found love, but has lost the ability to write, or returning to her own time, where she will be without the love she's found, but she will write her books and become the world famous, "Jane Austen".

I first read a Jane Austen novel when I was fifteen, purchasing a copy of *Emma* from a second-hand bookstore. I had no knowledge of the author at the time; I had been searching for something to read on the train journey home from school. I loved it. It was funny, and it was clever, containing a knowing humour that rendered it timeless, which other books of that era do not contain for me. I grew interested in the author. Who was this Jane Austen? I felt disarmed upon discovering she never married or had any children. This from a woman who wrote almost exclusively about love.

Considering a career as a writer myself, I grew curious. I researched the biographies of other female authors I admired – The Brontë sisters, Louisa May Alcott, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath. My disarmament grew: all these women either had disastrous romantic lives, or none at all. These women fulfilled artistic destinies, rather than - or in opposition to - romantic ones.

I wondered: does an artist, namely a female one, need to be single, to create art? And, if Jane Austen had to choose between the heart and the pen, what would she choose? That's how *Jane in Love* was born.

The time-travel was a way to set up the story's central dilemma – the choice she must make between love and career. If Jane Austen were confronted with the world-famous author she had become, and if it became the choice between that fulfillment or romantic love, what would she choose?

An extraordinary paradox lies at the heart of Austen's writing. Most of her novels depict a fantasy of her own life: they feature poor, witty women who win by marrying far above their station, (see Elizabeth Bennet, Elinor Dashwood, Fanny Price). Whereas in her own life, to pursue her dream of writing, Austen could not possibly have married.

A Room of One's Own

Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay argued that space for art is a gendered thing, more specifically, "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." Woolf decries society's expectation for women to marry and bear children primarily, with a creative life not entering the equation. She reasons that a room, both literal and figurative, is required to create art, and that women are traditionally barred from these spaces.

In one famous passage, she speculates on what would have become of a fictional sister of William Shakespeare, whom she called Judith, if she had desired a career in the arts like her brother. Judith possesses the same talents for words as William, the same drive and ambition, only she is female.

Judith's parents chastise her when she expresses a desire to write. Instead, she is encouraged to marry, and when she refuses, they disown her. She escapes to London to pursue acting, only to fall pregnant to a manager who had offered to help her career. Ultimately, she kills herself, while her brother William's career flourishes. Yes, Woolf paints a grim fate for any woman who dares pursue a creative life.

While men had rooms to create, to think, to work, women rarely had a room of their own. This reality can still exist today: if there is a home office or shed, it is usually the man's, whereas the woman occupies the communal spaces of the house. She sets up her laptop at the kitchen bench, where children and partners enter to commandeer her attention. I wrote most of this speech on the dining room table, while my son slept. While Cyril Connolly contended, 'there is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hall,' Joyce Carol Oates says the greatest enemy to creativity is distraction, and the greatest distraction must be the interruption of children. My own contention is that had Jane Austen married and had children, she would have made the best wife, the best mother, and published nothing.

Charlotte, Emily, and Anne

So, were the Brontës subjected to these restrictions of gender like Austen? The Brontës were born roughly forty years after Austen – they were of the next generation. But did they too, forgo marriage and family to pursue their writing careers? First, the similarities in story. Like Austen, none married, except for Charlotte, who wed and fell pregnant at 38 and died shortly after, because of the pregnancy. Both Austen and the Brontës had curates for fathers. Both fathers studied at Oxbridge. A pastor was a good living for a bookish kind of person,

which both fathers were. Both Austen and the Brontë sisters were of exceptional intelligence, well read and self-taught as writers.

But there, similarities cease. Austen held a higher socio-economic status than the Brontës: she lived in the south and her mother had distant noble connections. The Brontës lived in the north – a traditionally poorer area of England. Marriage was the great question of Austen's life, and it was only once it was put to bed, once she reached her early thirties and others had accepted her as a spinster, that her writing flourished. She published four novels in quick succession, whereas in her late twenties while living in Bath with hopes of her marrying not yet extinguished, she barely wrote anything.

For Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë, marriage seemed less of a grand question. Their mother Maria died from cancer while the girls were under ten years old. Without her to oversee and guide marriage hopes, with everything left up to the father, the same pressure never existed for them to marry, and none of them seemed to seek it out, either.

Being from a poorer class, with no dowry, if they wanted money, they needed to make it themselves: there was no relying on marriage to be financially secure. All three girls had long stints as governesses, yet still did not seek to escape that harsh and dull life through matrimony. They had no desire to trade one prison for another.

If love happened, it was with unattainable men, with whom the prospect of settling down was impossible. The great love of Charlotte's life was Professor Héger, a married man, who showed no signs of leaving that marriage. Whereas rumoured loves of Anne and Emily were just that, ghosts and whispers of men from the margins of society, wild curates and travellers, and none realistic life partners.

So while Austen's lack of marriage was possibly not her choice, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne seem to have avoided marriage on purpose, either through design or being distracted by other things. They certainly did not seek it out, with only Charlotte eventually succumbing at 38, long after she had made her case as a writer.

We will never know if Charlotte would have continued to write once a mother, I would like to think she would. *Jane Eyre* did make enough money for her to support herself in reasonable comfort, for a few years anyway, and that might have been enough for her to justify her continuing to write, in conjunction with her husband's earnings.

The Brontës were no strangers to sexism. Charlotte, aged 16, sent some of her work to then poet laureate Robert Southey. He replied that whilst she had 'the faculty of verse', she should give up her dreams, because 'literature cannot be the business of a woman's life: and it ought not to be.'

In the film *To Walk Invisible*, Sally Wainwright proposes that the Brontë sisters' primary motivation for publishing under pen names was to protect the dignity of their brother Bramwell. It had been his great dream to be a published

author, and their beating him to the post – three women – would embarrass him. Bramwell, drunk and feckless, did not possess the grit required to start a novel, let alone finish one. It is always the role of women to spare the dignity of men, even if it means denying and minimising their own achievements. This is not Bramwell's fault specifically, but more one of society for saying men's worth lies in professional success and providing financially for others, while women's lies in domestic success - marrying well, bearing children, and maintaining a home. While Jane Austen couldn't get a husband, the Brontës didn't want one. Both Austen and the sisters felt constrained by their gender, all knew that they'd be treated differently if they published under their real names, only revealing their identities once they were established authors. Earning one's own way was a far more palatable idea in the Brontë sisters' generation and socio-economic climate compared to Austen's.

A traditional domestic life eluded almost all of them, except for Charlotte, and this was literature's gain. Amongst those early pioneers of female authorship, the women are few are far between who had both a career and family. While both Austen and the Brontës approached the concept of marriage differently, the outcome was the same. None (except Charlotte) married, and all were published authors. They stood out from other women of their respective times for both these things.

The dedication at the beginning of *Jane in Love* is a quote by Stendhal, made in the 1780s, just after Jane Austen was born. I chose it for its resonance. It reads, 'All geniuses born women are lost to the public good.' In many ways, *Jane in Love* is a love letter to every woman who has ever wanted to write or create, to add their voice to the dream of the world.

ANNE BRONTË'S *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: SPEAKING OUT IN 1848

by Penny Gay, University of Sydney

A talk given to the ABA on 12th November 2022

Introduction

Anne Brontë's Preface to the Second Edition of *The Tenant*, published by Newby only six weeks after the successful sales of the first edition, responded eloquently to the carpings of some critics. It's a spirited defence of the 'truth'-telling of the novel's story, especially its details of the debauched behaviour of Arthur Huntingdon and his cronies. We know from biographical descriptions of Anne's five-year experience as a governess in a wealthy house, that the facts presented were based on her observations: '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.' She goes on to highlight the strong direction of her moral compass: '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.... O Reader! If there were less of this delicate concealment of facts – this whispering "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.'

Thus, the novel is not designed to 'amuse the Reader', but rather to engage him or her in considering the failings of contemporary society, especially as regards the education of the young 'of both sexes'. The Preface concludes with 'One word more' on the subject of 'the author's identity' – ie whether 'Acton Bell' is male or female. Again, she is forthright: '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.'

Deliberately un-gendered, the Preface sets the bar for a novel of startling originality that is structured on the forceful *interruption* of a male voice (telling his story via letters to a male friend, at some 20 years' distance from the events narrated), by a woman's diary record of her lived reality, including her realisation of the systemic oppression of women in a supposedly civilised society. Although the fictional frame is that of Gilbert's letters, they comprise slightly less than half of the novel's actual narrative, which focuses on the diarised experiences of the young Helen that lead her to eventually escape from an abusive marriage. Equally

importantly, through deep reading and thinking, she forms a determination to educate her young son in a different way of being a man.

Both sections of the novel - both male and female narrative voices – reveal and dissect the social and psychological problems caused by the accepted gender ideology of Victorian England. It is an ideology that had been at least 500 years in the making in European culture: Anne Brontë indicates her awareness of this in a pattern of imagery to be found in both the actions and the words of her characters, as I discuss below. The novel is so carefully crafted to support her argument that you can literally open it at any page and find examples of men and women behaving in a way that reinforces the pervasiveness of a gender ideology that stultifies their potential for good - both for themselves and for society.

I have no space here to undertake such close analysis at length, but the following notes summarise themes and episodes that readers might like to focus on as they contemplate Anne's careful orchestration of her theme, working towards a quasi-Utopian but hard-won resolution in which a once-callow young man and a once-abused young woman find themselves in a partnership of mutual respect, and a productive place in society.

I focus on the three major male figures who pursue the heroine – Helen, the 'Tenant'. (Readers soon realise that ***W***ildfell ***H***all is no ***W***uthering ***H***eights, and the mysterious Tenant is no Heathcliff, but a respectable single mother.) The treatment of not only Helen but her child Arthur is the test for each of these men as they attempt to perform a fatherly (or avuncular) relationship with him.

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1. **Gilbert Markham**

   The young 'squire', the naïve but entitled top dog of the rural community. A spoilt boy who needs to become a good man. Who will teach him?

Answer: not his mother, but perhaps – as the novel begins - his clever and plain-speaking sister, Rose. What Gilbert represents on the spectrum of true manliness quickly becomes evident as, 20 years later, he begins to write his story for his old friend Jack Halford (who, it emerges at the very end of the novel, has married Rose, offstage in the 'real' contemporary world of 1847). Gilbert presents his younger self as having a tendency to complacency, a habit of mansplaining, and a strong opinion of himself, surrounded as he is by an admiring local populace. **Chapter 1** establishes him as a slightly pompous young man, following in his late father's vocation as an industrious 'gentleman farmer'. But we also see that he's young and restless; he knows there is a wider world containing more complex challenges and interesting people. He encounters Helen in Chapter 1 as a mystery, an intruder, a challenge to his masculine 'self-conceit', but by **Chapter**

3 he is engaging with her as an intellectual, a thoughtful theorist of moral education, during a long discussion about how best to bring up a child (especially a boy). Gilbert shows his youthful complacency about gender clichés when he ends the discussion with the insult 'Well! you ladies must always have the last word.' He himself all too easily falls into these same stereotypes, brazenly 'snatch[ing] a kiss' from Eliza Millward, whom he knows he doesn't want to marry (nor does his doting mother want her as a daughter-in-law), in **Chapter 4.** But within his family, Gilbert *is* occasionally called out by young Rose's feminist eloquence, as we see in her wonderful comic monologue at the end of **Chapter 6**, about their mother's principle that her brothers must have *all* the domestic treats**.**

More and more attracted to the mysterious Mrs Graham, who refuses to conform to any of Gilbert's stereotypical views, he spends time with her whenever he can without seeming too intrusive or importunate. He *can* be courteous when faced with a woman whom he respects. He develops a natural fatherly relationship with young Arthur, encouraging him in appropriate outdoor activities (a contrast to the boy's biological father, as we see later in Helen's account). An unspoken sexual attraction between Gilbert and Helen soon grows (**Chapters 10 & 12**) – such that when he thinks that Helen is having secret trysts with her landlord Mr Lawrence, his immediate response is possessive jealousy, and a brutal attack on Lawrence without any attempt at explanation. This happens in **Chapter 14,** 'An Assault' – and the details of the attack are worth considering. It takes place on horseback in a narrow lane, as Gilbert throws off his 19th-century manners and falls back on medieval conventions of jousting in full armour, knocking Lawrence to the ground with the handle of his whip – 'garnished with a massive horse's head of plated metal' – a veritable club! There is blood gushing from the loser's head-wound as he lies unconscious; there is perhaps even death! Our romantic hero claps his spurs to his horse and gallops off in self-righteous anger - only to return a couple of times to check on Lawrence, having regained a semblance of a modern conscience. Brontë displays a nice comic ability for ironic writing, allowing the older Gilbert to parody the idiotic behaviour of his younger self in this episode of childish biffo.

In **Chapter 15** Helen (who doesn't know he's attacked her brother) passionately points out his failure of true manliness - 'you are not the man I thought you' - in believing the local gossip, and not speaking openly and honestly to her about it. Once again Brontë displays her gift for parody, as Gilbert goes into spoilt-adolescent posturings, whining melodramatically: 'you have done me an injury you can never repair ... you have blighted the freshness and promise of youth, and made my life a wilderness!' etc**.** Comic at this point (because we can see how silly Gilbert's language is - Walter Hargrave in **Chapter 37** falls back on the same sensationalist clichés), this attitude of blaming the woman for the man's

failure to behave rationally is what we recognise today as ‘gaslighting’. It becomes, as we see in Helen’s retrospective narrative, the much more threatening *modus operandi* of Arthur Huntingdon during Helen’s marriage, and also in due course that of Walter Hargrave.

2. Arthur Huntingdon

The Byronic dissolute, never satisfied with one woman, with no respect for anything except his own immediate desires. Huntingdon is a detailed portrait of a serial abuser and coercive controller.

In **Chapter 18** the young Helen (aged 18), despite her excellent intellect and ability in debate (based on her study of biblical ethics) is suffering the discombobulating pangs of romantic love for the first time, with a charming young gentleman whose main occupations revolve around free-loading at other gentlemen’s house-parties, hunting defenceless animals by day and drinking at night. As Huntingdon starts to woo this socially-inexperienced young woman, we see in her diary evidence of his tendency to violence, under the guise of sexual games: he regularly, for example, ‘seizes her hand’, holding it against her will. In this same chapter there is an echo - much more menacing - of Gilbert’s ‘stolen’ kiss with Eliza Millward. Huntingdon also quickly begins to exhibit his standard ploys of emotional control: what looks like sexual teasing, a game with his victim, played out at first over her drawings, soon moves to barely hidden bullying in comments on everything she does or says. The flirtation with the overtly sensual Annabella Wilmot begins here, as a way of provoking Helen’s jealousy.

Huntingdon’s ‘seizing’ of Helen’s drawings anticipates Brontë’s increasing use of personal material *things* - metonymic objects - to symbolise Helen’s self, her *mind* and her *body*: ‘ “Mr Huntingdon, those are my unfinished sketches,” cried I, “and I never let any one see them” ’. In **Chapter 19**, the traditional novel’s love scene becomes Huntingdon’s claiming of his victim, as he yet again ‘forcibly possessed himself of my hand’ and keeps her physically captive where he wants her: ‘I made an effort to rise, but he was kneeling on my dress.’ As she capitulates to his desire, his actions are described in a lexicon of violence: ‘nearly squeezing me to death’, ‘again he caught me in his arms, and smothered me with kisses.’ This is not the behaviour of a gentleman, but a dangerous parody of the conventional gestures of courtly love (a topic I discuss briefly towards the end).

The prospects for a happy marriage begin to sour as readers are shown Huntingdon’s ‘friendships’ in **Chapter 22**. Brontë’s point is to display a widespread culture of toxic masculinity in the clubbishness of privileged young men left to themselves. Shamefully, it is still current in our society: one has only to look at our parliaments, some of our expensive private schools, our football and cricket teams, etc. Huntingdon blithely mentions ‘orgies’ (before correcting

himself to 'high festivals') of drinking and gambling, and they include, for entertainment, the group's bullying of Lowborough into a life of gambling and alcohol addiction, Grimsby's habitual malevolence, Hattersley's resort to easy violence to solve any apparent problem between men. And above all Huntingdon's pathological attitude to women as mere toys.

In **Chapter 23**, 'First Weeks of Matrimony' we see Huntingdon's coercive control of his new wife: first on the hurried bridal trip, so disappointing to Helen, who has never before travelled to the great cultural centres of Europe; and secondly, once home and settled in Grassdale Manor, in the matter of her religious devotion**.** Helen does attempt to argue, to present her views on a good life and marriage, but her husband's treatment of her quickly becomes habitual. **Chapter 24** opens with a long paragraph describing the *modus operandi* of his coercive control: starting with his objection to her simply reading a book, he insists on telling her sensational 'stories of his former amours, always turning upon the ruin of some confiding girl or the cozening of some unsuspecting husband', claiming that she is jealous rather than – as she clearly is - morally horrified. At the same time we see that this newly-wed young woman is internalising blame for her situation: 'I well know I have no right to complain' - the system of marriage is built to deny her independent thought. Huntingdon is already drinking far too much, and his potential for actual physical violence emerges as he mistreats his dog by throwing a book at its head - it also grazes Helen's hand.

Nevertheless, so strong is Helen's self-blaming for the failures of the relationship, she agrees that they go to London to join fashionable society (**Chapter 25)**. Plainly and soberly dressed Helen is obliged to 'sparkle in costly jewels and deck myself out like a painted butterfly', and 'fear[s] to disappoint him by some awkward misdemeanour, or some trait of inexperienced ignorance about the customs of society'. Arthur soon enough sends Helen away with the excuse that she is pregnant and needs country air and rest. By the time he returns home after many delays he is a degraded man, 'listless and languid, his beauty strangely diminished, his vigour and vivacity quite departed.' All that superficial charm is gone. But still she is so thoroughly coerced by the notion that it is her fault, despite her 'forbearance', her intense wifely submission to his every need, that she agrees to his inviting his gang of 'friends'. To which is added the neighbour, Walter Hargrave, who begins his campaign to seduce Helen – a long game, like the chess-game that he later plays against her (discussed below).

By **Chapter 36**, poignantly titled 'Dual Solitude', on the third anniversary of their marriage, the accumulated evidence of Huntingdon's abusive behaviour is so strong (including his adultery with Annabella) that Helen is finally disillusioned about her marriage. She can by now spell out to him her new feminist understandings in plain speech: 'as long as I discharge my functions of steward

and housekeeper ... without pay and without thanks, you cannot afford to part with me. I shall therefore remit those duties when my bondage becomes intolerable.' It makes this reader wonder whether Helen has caught up with Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* at some point when Huntingdon was no longer interested in what she was reading! Helen is no longer gaslit, despite her husband's continuing attempts to assert emotional control by (for example) claiming his drinking is all her fault - 'I drive him to it by my unnatural, unwomanly conduct', she reports sardonically. By **Chapter 39**, three years later again, Huntingdon commits the ultimate sin (according to Brontë's implicit agenda in the Preface): abusing his young child by forcing him to drink and curse, in order to 'make a man of him'. By **Chapter 40**, he has descended to physical violence against Helen: he destroys her paintings and takes away her money and jewels, as she tries to prepare her escape to an independent life. Once again we note how personal physical objects become an increasingly useful narrative signifier as symbols of Helen's self. And this is particularly so with the more subtle male abuser, Walter Hargrave.

3. Walter Hargrave
The stalker.

When he first appears, in **Chapter 26** (when Helen is 19 and newly married) he presents as an amiable gentleman: polite, attentive, with 'good conversational powers and considerable information and taste'. But she can't really enjoy his company because her pleasure in his conversation arouses Huntingdon's jealousy. In **Chapter 30**, with Huntingdon at home in Grassdale after months of debauchery in London, Hargrave, 'the neighbour', is helpful in tempering Huntingdon's descent into alcoholism, and Helen is pathetically grateful, blaming herself as she still does for his decline. In this chapter Brontë also provides a strikingly insightful long passage detailing Helen's self-recrimination - showing that her religious indoctrination hinders rather than helps her determination to follow the true moral path: 'since he and I are one, I so identify myself with him, that I feel his degradation, his failings, and transgressions as my own ...'.

By **Chapter 33,** two years later, Walter is beginning to show his hand; he is aiming to seduce the betrayed Helen into throwing in her lot with him as his mistress. This chapter features a wonderful narrative set-piece: the game of chess which Hargrave insists on playing with Helen. She plays hard, but he is ultimately the better player – having, as it were, greater knowledge of the 'game' of life. The dialogue recorded during this contest gains force from its symbolic use of the chess pieces: ' "It is those bishops that trouble me," said he; "but the bold knight can overleap the reverend gentleman," taking my last bishop with his knight'. At his 'checkmate' he (again) takes her hand and squeezes it, murmuring 'Beaten – beaten!', and insultingly gazes at her with 'exultation' and the 'ardour' of a

triumphant lover: he knows, as Helen is soon to discover herself, that Annabella and Huntingdon are at that moment having an amorous rendezvous.

Hargrave's attentions get more importunate, despite Helen's continued attempts to outwit him in debate (for example in **Chapter 37**, the dramatic end of Volume II of the novel). But by **Chapter 39**, Hargrave can be patient no more: he corners her in her painting studio with his overheated declarations and, soon, attempted rape. Seizing her hands ('he was completely roused'), realising that he has a blackmailing advantage as he espies Grimsby maliciously watching the scene through the library window, he asserts,

> 'I *will* be your consoler and defender! And if your conscience upbraid you for it, say I overcame you and you could not choose but yield!'
>
> I never saw a man so terribly excited. He precipitated himself towards me. I snatched up my palette-knife and held it against him.

What an extraordinary response for a 19th-century woman threatened with sexual violence! Helen wins this round by *un*feminine behaviour, using the tool of her professional trade as an art-maker: the palette-knife is a symbolic object that carries a magnificent weight of meaning. She follows it up by publicly shaming Hargrave, forcing him to admit his unmanly assault in front of his friends (including her husband): 'tell those gentlemen – these *men* – whether or not I yielded to your solicitations ... I charge you upon your honour as a gentleman (if you have any), to answer truly. Did I, or did I not?' Defeated, he leaves Helen's narrative, and she makes her preparations to definitively remove herself and her son from the toxic environment of her marital home.

4. The persistence of the Romance tradition

At the end of Helen's diary, the novel turns from the realistic drama of Helen's lived experience back to the romantic comedy form of what I like to call The Education of Gilbert Markham, which was flagged in the first section of the novel in Gilbert's wryly retrospective letters to his friend Halford. Underpinning both narrative formats is an appropriation of the metaphor-making capacities of Medieval narrative. In particular, as I have already indicated, the idea of what makes and displays true manliness invokes the discussion in Medieval and Renaissance literature of the making of what Chaucer called a 'verray, parfit gentil knyght'. The novel uses references to the gestures and accoutrements of chivalry to underline its discussion of contemporary (19th-century) masculinity, and to indicate how far its ideals have been brutalised into bullying and casual violence in 500 years of war and greed. Hargrave's use of the phrase 'the bold knight can overleap the reverend gentleman' in the chess game is hubristic as well as immoral: no true knight would disrespect the moral authority of the church and its bishops.

Concerning relations between the sexes, Brontë draws on readers' memories (perhaps from childhood reading) of the immensely influential literature of Courtly Love, which arrived in England from France in the 13th century; it was then hybridised with the native legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. The lady desired by the questing knight is to be found in a mysterious and remote hall, or even more often, an enclosed garden, a *locus amoenus*, frequently planted with roses. The rose, of course, in many cultures symbolises the feminine beloved, both pure and sensual. Throughout the novel Brontë associates roses with the heroine Helen and her potential to bestow love on the young men who, in turn, need to learn how to be true gentlemen before they can deserve it.

The chapters in the novel in which the rose-giving motif occurs are **Chapter 10** (the first mutual recognition of Gilbert and Helen's strong sexual attraction); **Chapter 29,** in which Hargrave, 'The Neighbour', hubristically enters Helen's *locus amoenus*, calling it 'a paradise' – though it only looks like one, as it's actually her marital prison, Grassdale. As the False Knight, Hargrave in **Chapter 37** presumes on his neighbourly status and speaks to Helen of his passion with 'bold yet artful eloquence'; later his sister Esther tries to defuse a situation she doesn't comprehend by offering Walter a garden rose to give to Helen.

The final, sweetly comedic example of the motif occurs in the novel's **Conclusion**, in which Gilbert remains something of a foolish young squire unable to read Helen's revolutionary appropriation of the rose-giving motif, until she explains it to him: it is 'an emblem of my heart'. We note, in passing, that it is a 'Christmas rose', not a traditional chivalric rose at all, but a hellebore, symbolic of her suffering and resilience in gruelling conditions. One might even say that Helen understands herself as a different 'species' of woman and mother.

There is much that is worth unpacking in Brontë's use of the symbols of chivalry in analysing 'romantic' love, and further research that needs to be done about what Medieval and Renaissance literature she might have read. (She clearly knew her Shakespeare, and quotes him often; and he, of course, frequently plays with the idea of chivalry.) It is, at the very least, a poetical touch that tempers and gives further depth to Anne Brontë's realistic truth-telling about the systemic difficulties obstructing the education of young men towards true manliness. It is as relevant in the twenty-first century as it was in the nineteenth.

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MARRIAGE IN VICTORIAN FICTION

by Christopher Cooper

A ZOOM talk given to the ABA on 18th August 2022

Tonight's *Brontë Matters* will centre around **Marriage in Victorian Fiction**. I propose to talk for about 30 minutes, followed by up to an hour of discussion.

Probably the majority of Victorian fiction deals with courtship and marriage. Certainly all of Jane Austen's novels (we'll make her an honorary Victorian for the purpose of this discussion) deal with this all engrossing aspect of life. Though it must be pointed out that her novels deal primarily with the precursors of marriage – love and friendship and courtship. Marriage usually comes only at the end where we're left with the impression that, after the wedding bells have rung, the happy couple live happily ever after. Indeed not a lot is said about marriage itself in many Victorian novels. Sometimes we see marriages being pulled apart by other developing relationships, but what about the institution of marriage itself?

But before we come to the literature, let me outline the marriage laws of Victorian Britain. These are complicated by the fact that they changed throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Moreover there were differences between what we call the four nations. Scottish law relating to marriage was much more relaxed than English law – which is why we had the phenomenon of elopement to Gretna Green, just across the border from England. The laws of Northern Ireland were much more like those in England, but there were some differences related to the Catholic/Protestant divide. I believe that the Welsh followed English law.

By 'marriage', according to Sir William Blackstone's **Commentaries on the Laws of England** (Oxford, 1765-69, 'the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during her marriage, or at least is incorporated or consolidated into that of her husband, under whose wing, protection and cover, she performs everything'.

This system of **coverture** underpinned the laws of Victorian England so far as they related to married women. In effect, a woman surrendered her legal existence on marriage. The various amendments to this position during the nineteenth century were piecemeal rather than systematic.

On marriage, the control of, and income from, a woman's **real property**, that is, property held in the form of freehold land, passed under the common law to her husband, though he could not dispose of it without her consent. Her **personal property**, that is, money from earnings or investments, and personal belongings such as jewellery, passed absolutely into his control, and she could part with them only with his consent; he could, for example,

overrule any bequests she made of her personal property. To evade these provisions under the common law, it was necessary to agree a marriage settlement under equity law.

Prior to the **Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857** a woman not only could take no property from the marriage on separation or divorce, any money after the separation or divorce that she earnt could be claimed by the husband. A man could desert his wife, yet still have a legal claim on any money that she earnt after the separation.

With the act of 1857 things improved for women. It denied the husband his right to the earnings of a wife he had deserted, and returned to a woman divorced or legally separated the property rights of a single woman. Then the **Married Woman's Property Act** in **1882** allowed women to retain what they owned at the time of marriage.

Before 1882 a married woman couldn't sue or be sued — if, for example, she felt herself to be libelled, her husband could sue and claim for damages, because he was the only injured party, but she could not. Correspondingly, he became liable for her debts and contracts, and for any breaches of the law committed by her before or during their marriage since it was held that she acted only under her husband's direction (it was this provision that made Dickens' Mr Bumble declare that the law is an ass). Married women held the same legal status as criminals, minors and the insane.

Children were also the property of the husband. However an Act of 1839 allowed an innocent wife custody of her children under the age of seven years (raised to sixteen years in 1873).

A woman's body was also held to belong to her husband. It wasn't until 1891 that a High Court ruling denied the husband the right to imprison his wife in pursuit of his conjugal rights. And it wasn't until 1991 that a similar ruling denied him the right to rape her.

Before the **Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act** of 1857 divorces could only be obtained in England in three ways:
(1) The husband could sue another man for 'criminal conversation' (i.e., for compromising his wife, and therefore diminishing her value, so that he could claim damages);
(2) An ecclesiastical divorce, or annulment, which did not allow the right of re-marriage;
(3) A private Act of Parliament which separated the parties *ex vinculis matrimonii* and which did allow re-marriage.

The 1857 Act was designed to allow moderately wealthy men to divorce their wives. A woman could be divorced on the simple grounds of *her* adultery (her adultery threatened his ability to pass his property to his male heirs), whereas a woman had to prove adultery aggravated by desertion (for two years), or by

cruelty, rape, sodomy, incest or bigamy. The husband could claim damages against the adulterous third party, the wife could not.

This was the law until 1923, when the grounds of divorce were made the same for both sexes. Until Legal Aid was available after 1949 divorce remained expensive, and the less well-to-do had to make use of the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1878 which allowed a less costly judicial separation but without the right of re- marriage.

There are two important ages in relation to sex and marriage – the age of consent and the minimum age for marriage. From the middle ages the age of consent was 12. In 1875 the age of consent was raised to 13 and in 1885 to 16. In 1950 the parliament of Northern Ireland raised it to 17, but the British government overruled this and brought it back to 16, where it remains today.

Until 1823 the minimum legal age in England for marriage was 21 years for both men and women. After 1823 a male could marry as young as 14 without parental consent and a girl at 12. In recent years this was raised to 18, but children as young as 16 were able to marry with the consent of their parents. However, this year a law was passed whereby nobody can marry until the age of 18, with or without parental consent.

So much for marriage amongst real people. Now let's turn our attention to marriage in the Victorian fiction. There's a YouTube channel called *Books and Things*. A couple of recent episodes focussed on Marriage in Victorian Novels.

The ones mentioned included:
He Knew He Was Right and *Can You Forgive Her?* by Anthony Trollope
Jude the Obscure and *The Woodlanders* by Thomas Hardy
The Tenant of Wildfell Hall by Anne Brontë
Dombey and Son by Charles Dickens
Middlemarch by George Eliot
I expect you've read most of these.

The three I hadn't read were:
New Grub Street by George Gissing
Love and Mr Lewisham by H.G. Wells
Diary of a Nobody by George and Weedon Grossmith

The presenter, an Australian young woman, didn't go into much detail because, in all, all ten books were covered in ten minutes!

In George Eliot's *Middlemarch* marriage is something that's very important to the plot. Most characters there marry for love rather than obligation, yet marriage still appears negative and unromantic. It is not considered to be the ultimate source of happiness.

Through the couples in *Middlemarch*, George Eliot expresses the fact that marriage is a journey that requires work and constant evolving of one's perspective of themselves and their partners. When Dorothea meets Casaubon she completely loses her state of mind as she is very intrigued by him while he gives no care to her desires. Casaubon's supposed wisdom and intelligence excited Dorothea because she hoped his influence would help her to become more educated. Their courtship was a short one and Casaubon continuously hinted that brief courtships make an unsteady marriage. Their marriage was finalized through letters rather than getting to know each other face to face. Casaubon, after they get married, doesn't really care for Dorothea, leading her to question her worth as he won't include her in his studies. They both become unhappy in their marriage and, as Casaubon then becomes ill, it was not an ideal situation.

In *Jude the Obscure*, Jude is seduced into marrying Arabella, a coarse woman, by her pretending to be pregnant by him. She leaves him and goes off to Australia where she bigamously marries the manager of a hotel in Sydney. Jude falls in love with his cousin, Sue Bridehead, but Sue marries Mr Phillotson, a school teacher twenty years her senior. But she cannot bring herself to sleep with him, and she eventually persuades her husband to allow her to leave him and move in with Jude. But that goes against the rules of marriage and causes a big scandal, causing Phillotson to lose his job.

Then Arabella returns to England, having left her Australian 'husband' and Jude's son that he never knew about. Eventually Jude sleeps with Sue and they have two children but are socially ostracised. This novel is as complicated as one can get when it comes to marriage.

Wilkie Collins wrote several novels that highlighted the problems that can arise in a marriage. *The Woman in White*, first published in 1859, is one of his best known novels, and features a wife who has been placed in an asylum by her husband. It was apparently fairly common for husbands who wanted to be rid of their wives to make out that they are insane and commit them to an asylum. Sometimes they went to great lengths to persuade their wife that they, indeed, were going mad. There's a famous play, called *Gaslight*, in which the husband manipulates events so as to make the wife believe she is going insane. The name arises from the fact that he manipulates the gas supply in their house, from the next door unoccupied house, which dims the light at certain times.

But probably the novel that most focuses on the legal aspects of marriage is *Man and Wife* by Wilkie Collins, published in 1870. It highlights the differences in the marriage laws between England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Anne had been an opera singer, before she married John Vanborough. She was a Catholic and he became a Catholic in order to marry her in a Catholic Church in Northern Ireland.

They have a daughter, also known as Anne. When the mother and father had been married for 12 years John decides that he'd made a huge error in his choice of wife. She was very beautiful, and talented, but she wasn't from a rich family and she didn't have the sort of social connections that could help him to rise socially. His goal was to get into parliament.

One day his lawyer informs him that his marriage was illegal under the laws of Northern Ireland. The problem was the fact that he had only been a Catholic for two months before the marriage. The law required that a priest can only marry two Catholics, and only if each had been a Catholic for at least 12 months.

So did John Vanborough decide to rectify the problem by going through a second marriage to Anne – this time a legal one? Not at all. He was out the door before you could say John Vanborough. In an instant Anne became an un-married mother and their daughter, also called Anne, became an illegitimate child.

Many years later, young Anne falls in love with Geoffrey Delamayn, ironically the son of the lawyer whose information about Irish law had dissolved the marriage between her mother and father. The father had now become very rich and had been promoted to the House of Lords.

They get secretly engaged. Anne is a governess to her childhood best friend, Blanche, the daughter of Lady Lundie. Geoffrey is a spendthrift and a gambler, and is about to be disinherited by his father if he doesn't marry a rich wife. So, because Anne is only a governess, he has kept his relationship with Anne a secret.

Meanwhile Blanche has become engaged to Arnold Brinkworth, a most eligible bachelor. They are at a lawn party at the house of Lady Lundie. In a secret meeting during a game of croquet, Anne insists that Geoffrey fulfils his promise to marry her – that very day!

How is this to be possible at such short notice? Luckily they are just across the border, in Scotland, where marriage laws are quite lax. Anne will go to a quiet, secluded hotel nearby. When he can get away Geoffrey will join her. They will stay there as man and wife and, under Scottish law, if there are witnesses who believe that they are married, they *will* be legally married. No vows are necessary.

The landlady is somewhat suspicious of an unaccompanied woman checking into the hotel, but Anne assures her that her husband will be joining her later. Unfortunately Geoffrey gets a message from his father to go home to see

him over some business. So he sends his best friend, Arnold Brinkworth, to go to Anne to explain that he wouldn't be coming till the next day.

But when he arrives at the hotel it is assumed by the landlady, and a man-of-all-jobs who works at the hotel, that he is Anne's husband. He can't say that he isn't because that would blemish Anne's reputation, so he has to play along with the story. What makes things worse is that an almighty storm arises and he has to stay the night. Of course he sleeps on the sofa, but the damage is done. Under Scottish law he and Anne are man and wife.

When Geoffrey hears of this he's relieved because he had been looking for an honourable excuse to break off the engagement, but you can imagine what Blanche felt about it!

So now let's review the marriages in the Brontë novels.

JANE EYRE:
Jane & Rochester: Would you marry a man who concealed the fact that he had a mad woman in the attic and almost caused Jane to commit bigamy?

SHIRLEY:
Shirley & Louis: At one stage Shirley was going to marry Robert. Did she choose the right brother in the end?
Caroline & Robert

VILLETTE:
Dr John & Polly: Lucy never gets to marry Monsieur Emanuel because he dies at sea. She was once keen on Dr. John. What if she had married him?

THE PROFESSOR:
William & Frances: William Crimsworth marries his student, Frances, and sets her up as a mistress of her own school. According to Charlotte they seem to be very happy as husband and wife and parents of three children.

AGNES GREY:
Agnes & Edward Weston: This marriage seems to have been a happy one.

THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL:
Helen & Arthur
Helen & Gilbert: In Gilbert, Helen had a much better husband than Arthur. But would she have been happy with Gilbert? He seems to have been a weak man, while she was very strong. Would Helen have 'worn the pants' in their marriage?

WUTHERING HEIGHTS:
Wuthering Heights has a large number of married couples:
Mr & Mrs Earnshaw
Mr & Mrs Linton
Hindley & Frances
Cathy & Edward
Heathcliff & Isabella
Cathy 2 & Linton
Cathy 2 & Hareton
What are your thoughts on these many marriages?