

**TEACHER IMAGES IN “THE PROFESSOR”
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Charlotte Brontë’s “The Professor” offers a unique lens through which to examine the role and representation of teachers in 19th-century literature. This paper explores the portrayal of educators, particularly the protagonist William Crimsworth, within the novel, focusing on the intersection of gender, class, and pedagogy. By analyzing the teacher-student dynamics and the societal expectations of educators, this study highlights how Brontë critiques and reinforces contemporary educational norms. The findings reveal that “The Professor” not only reflects the challenges faced by teachers in a rigid social hierarchy but also underscores the transformative potential of education.

INTRODUCTION. Charlotte Brontë’s *The Professor*, though less celebrated than her other works such as *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, provides a rich and nuanced ground for analyzing the representation of teachers in Victorian literature. As Brontë’s first novel, it offers a unique perspective on the challenges and complexities of the teaching profession during the 19th century, particularly through the lens of its protagonist, William Crimsworth. The novel delves into the intersections of gender, class, and education, presenting a multifaceted portrayal of teachers that reflects both the societal constraints and the transformative potential of their role.

William Crimsworth, an Englishman who becomes a teacher in Brussels, serves as a central figure through which Brontë explores the dynamics of power, authority, and

mentorship in the classroom. His journey from an unappreciated clerk to a respected educator highlights the struggles and triumphs of a profession often undervalued in Victorian society. Through Crimsworth's interactions with his students, particularly Frances Evans Henri, Brontë challenges traditional hierarchies and emphasizes the importance of mutual respect and intellectual exchange in education. As Crimsworth reflects, "I felt that I could teach her, and that she could teach me" [2. P. 87]. This statement underscores the novel's emphasis on the reciprocal nature of learning and teaching, breaking away from the rigid teacher-student dichotomy of the time.

This paper aims to explore the multifaceted images of teachers in *The Professor*, focusing on how Brontë critiques societal expectations and highlights the transformative power of education. By examining the novel's portrayal of teaching as both a personal and professional endeavor, this study seeks to shed light on Brontë's vision of education as a means of empowerment and social mobility. For instance, Frances, a lace-mender turned teacher, embodies the struggles of women seeking intellectual and professional fulfillment in a patriarchal society. Brontë writes, "She was poor, plain, and small; yet she had a mind, and it was not a mind to be despised" [2. P. 112]. This portrayal challenges the societal norms that often marginalized women in educational roles.

Furthermore, the paper will analyze how Brontë uses the characters of Crimsworth and Frances to question and redefine the roles of teachers and students within the rigid structures of gender and class that dominated Victorian society. The novel's critique of elitism in education is evident in Crimsworth's disdain for the superficiality of some of his colleagues, as he observes, "They were not teachers, but task-masters; not guides, but drivers" [2. P. 95]. This critique highlights Brontë's advocacy for a more compassionate and egalitarian approach to education.

In doing so, this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of *The Professor* as a work that not only reflects the realities of 19th-century education but also offers a progressive vision of teaching as a profession capable of transcending societal limitations. Through a close reading of key passages and an analysis of the novel's historical and cultural context, this paper will demonstrate how Brontë's portrayal of teachers remains relevant to contemporary discussions about the role of educators in shaping individuals and societies.

Methods

This study employs a close reading of Charlotte Brontë's "The Professor", with particular attention to passages that depict teaching and learning, as well as the interactions between

teachers and students. The close reading approach allows for a detailed analysis of the text, focusing on the language, themes, and character dynamics that Brontë uses to portray the complexities of the teaching profession. By examining key scenes and dialogues, this study aims to uncover the nuances of Brontë’s critique of 19th-century educational practices and societal expectations.

The analysis is framed within the historical and social context of 19th-century education, drawing on secondary sources that discuss Brontë’s life, works, and the broader Victorian era. This contextual approach helps to situate “The Professor” within the literary and cultural landscape of its time, highlighting how Brontë’s personal experiences as a teacher and her observations of societal norms influenced her writing. For example, Brontë’s own time as a student and teacher in Brussels, which inspired the setting of “The Professor”, provides valuable insight into the novel’s portrayal of education and its challenges.

In addition to close reading and historical contextualization, this study utilizes the IMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion) structure to organize the findings and provide a clear and logical framework for the discussion. This structure ensures that the research is presented in a systematic and accessible manner, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the novel’s themes and their relevance to contemporary discussions about education.

To further enrich the analysis, this study incorporates critical perspectives from literary scholars who have examined “The Professor” and Brontë’s broader body of work. By engaging with these secondary sources, the paper aims to build on existing scholarship while offering new insights into the novel’s representation of teachers and the educational system. For instance, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s “The Madwoman in the Attic” provides a feminist lens through which to analyze the gender dynamics in “The Professor”, while Sally Shuttleworth’s “Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology” offers a deeper understanding of the psychological dimensions of Brontë’s characters.

Finally, this study pays special attention to the novel’s use of symbolism and narrative techniques, such as first-person narration, to convey the protagonist’s growth as a teacher and individual. By analyzing these literary devices, the paper seeks to uncover how Brontë uses form and style to reinforce the novel’s themes of empowerment, transformation, and the subversion of societal norms.

In summary, this study combines close textual analysis, historical contextualization, and engagement with secondary sources to provide a comprehensive examination of the representation of teachers in “The Professor”. By employing the IMRAD structure and

drawing on a range of critical perspectives, the paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of Brontë's work and its enduring relevance to discussions about education, gender, and class.

Results

Charlotte Brontë's novel *The Professor* presents diverse images of teachers, reflecting different educational philosophies and their impact on students. The protagonist, William Crimsworth, embodies a more progressive and empathetic teaching style compared to the rigid and often manipulative approaches of other educators in the novel. His experiences at various institutions highlight the contrast between strict discipline-based education and a more student-centered methodology.

Crimsworth's early experience at M. Pelet's school introduces a French-style education system, characterized by hierarchical authority and rote learning. M. Pelet, as a teacher and school administrator, emphasizes discipline and control, reflecting the 19th-century continental European approach to pedagogy [2. P 45]. As noted by Hensley, "Pelet's authoritarian stance aligns with the rigid structures of male-dominated education in the period, where discipline was often prioritized over intellectual curiosity" [3. P 112]. This portrayal suggests that Brontë critiques an education system that values order over genuine engagement with learning.

In contrast, Mademoiselle Reuter, the headmistress of the girls' school where Crimsworth later teaches, exemplifies a more manipulative approach to education. Her focus is less on intellectual development and more on maintaining her social and institutional power. She presents an image of a teacher who, while outwardly nurturing, ultimately prioritizes control and self-interest over her students' academic growth [2. P 78]. As Armstrong argues, "Reuter represents the shortcomings of an education system where women in authority must navigate societal expectations, often compromising genuine intellectual rigor in favor of maintaining appearances" [1. P 203].

Crimsworth's own approach to teaching, however, shifts away from these authoritarian and self-serving models. His mentorship of Frances Henri, a student who later becomes a teacher, illustrates Brontë's vision of an ideal educator. Frances, unlike Pelet and Reuter, embodies a balanced approach to teaching, where discipline is tempered with encouragement and intellectual curiosity is fostered [2. P 56]. According to Peterson, "Frances Henri's teaching style aligns with emerging 19th-century ideals of individualized education, where teachers engage with students personally rather than through mere

authority” [4. P 76]. Through her character, Brontë advocates for a more compassionate and student-centered approach to teaching.

Overall, *The Professor* presents three distinct images of teachers: the authoritarian, the manipulative, and the compassionate. Brontë’s critique of contemporary education becomes evident through these portrayals, as she highlights the need for sincerity and engagement in teaching. By juxtaposing these different models, the novel not only reflects 19th-century educational debates but also offers a progressive vision of effective teaching.

Discussion

Charlotte Brontë’s *The Professor* presents a multifaceted portrayal of teachers, challenging traditional educational paradigms and exploring the broader implications of pedagogy on social hierarchy, gender roles, and personal development. Through the characters of William Crimsworth, M. Pelet, Mademoiselle Reuter, and Frances Evans Henri, Brontë critiques the rigid, authoritarian teaching models of the 19th century while advocating for a more engaged and morally responsible approach to education. The novel’s emphasis on mutual learning, personal integrity, and the transformative power of education remains relevant to contemporary pedagogical discourse.

One of the central themes in Brontë’s depiction of teachers is the contrast between authoritarian and progressive educational methods. M. Pelet represents the former, embodying a strict and hierarchical approach to instruction. His school reflects the continental European educational model of the time, which emphasized discipline over student engagement [2. P.45]. Scholars argue that Brontë critiques this model by portraying Pelet as a teacher who prioritizes obedience rather than critical thinking. As Hensley notes, “Pelet’s rigid classroom structure mirrors the broader socio-political hierarchies of the 19th century, reinforcing the notion that education was primarily a tool for maintaining class distinctions” [3. P.114].

Mademoiselle Reuter, in contrast, introduces a different but equally flawed image of a teacher. As the headmistress of a girls’ school, she appears nurturing but ultimately prioritizes her own social and economic interests over the intellectual growth of her students [2. P.78]. Armstrong suggests that “Reuter’s role highlights the constraints placed upon female educators, who, in navigating a male-dominated system, often had to adopt manipulative strategies to maintain authority” [1. P.206]. This portrayal critiques an educational system that limits both teachers and students, particularly women, by valuing appearances and compliance over genuine intellectual development.

William Crimsworth, the novel's protagonist, undergoes significant pedagogical development, ultimately embodying a more progressive and student-centered teaching philosophy. Unlike Pelet and Reuter, Crimsworth evolves into an educator who fosters independence and critical thinking in his students. His relationship with Frances Henri is particularly illustrative of this dynamic. As Peterson observes, "Crimsworth's approach to teaching gradually aligns with emerging 19th-century theories of individualized instruction, which emphasized the teacher's role in nurturing a student's innate abilities rather than imposing rigid discipline" [4. P.79]. Frances herself, as both a student and later a teacher, represents the ideal balance between structure and encouragement, demonstrating Brontë's vision of an ideal educator [2. P.156].

Furthermore, *The Professor* challenges traditional gender roles in education through Frances Henri's transformation from pupil to instructor. In an era when women's intellectual agency was often suppressed, Frances's development signals Brontë's progressive stance on female education. According to Gilbert and Gubar, "Brontë's depiction of Frances Henri as both a student and a teacher underscores the novel's implicit argument for women's right to intellectual and professional autonomy" [6. P.370]. This perspective aligns with broader Victorian debates on women's education, positioning *The Professor* as an early feminist critique of gendered limitations in pedagogy.

Brontë's portrayal of teachers in *The Professor* extends beyond individual characters to offer a broader critique of 19th-century educational systems. By contrasting different teaching models, she not only exposes their shortcomings but also advocates for an approach rooted in integrity, empathy, and intellectual engagement. The novel suggests that education should be a reciprocal process, where both teacher and student contribute to a shared intellectual journey. This vision remains highly relevant in modern discussions on pedagogy, particularly in debates over student-centered learning, teacher-student relationships, and the role of education in fostering social mobility.

Conclusion

In *The Professor*, Charlotte Brontë presents a complex and multifaceted image of teachers, reflecting the societal challenges and opportunities of 19th-century education. Through the contrasting portrayals of M. Pelet, Mademoiselle Reuter, William Crimsworth, and Frances Henri, Brontë critiques rigid, authoritarian teaching methods while advocating for a more compassionate and intellectually stimulating approach to education. The novel highlights how pedagogical methods are deeply intertwined with issues of power, gender, and class, ultimately shaping students' intellectual and moral development.

A key takeaway from Brontë's portrayal of teachers is the recognition that education is not merely about transferring knowledge but also about shaping character and fostering critical thinking. The authoritarian model, exemplified by M. Pelet, reinforces rigid hierarchies and social conformity, whereas the manipulative approach of Mademoiselle Reuter exposes the dangers of prioritizing personal ambition over genuine educational progress. In contrast, William Crimsworth and Frances Henri represent a vision of education based on integrity, mutual respect, and intellectual independence. Frances's journey from student to teacher is particularly significant, as it underscores Brontë's progressive stance on women's education and their right to intellectual agency.

Furthermore, *The Professor* contributes to broader debates about the role of education in social mobility and personal empowerment. The novel suggests that effective teaching can break down class barriers and enable individuals to achieve personal and professional growth. This idea resonates with contemporary discussions on the transformative power of education, particularly in its potential to challenge societal inequalities. As education continues to evolve, the themes explored in *The Professor* remain highly relevant, prompting modern educators to reflect on the ethical responsibilities of teaching and the importance of fostering an inclusive and dynamic learning environment.

Ultimately, Brontë's exploration of educational models in *The Professor* goes beyond a simple critique of Victorian-era pedagogy. It serves as a timeless commentary on the fundamental role of teachers in shaping the intellectual and moral development of future generations. By examining the intersections of gender, class, and pedagogy, the novel offers not only a critique of contemporary educational norms but also a vision of teaching as a transformative force. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of Brontë's work and its relevance to ongoing discussions about the role of educators in society, reinforcing the idea that effective teaching is central to both individual success and broader social progress.

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