

## ABSTRACT

Whittington, Elizabeth Michelle. Identity is in the Eye of the Beholder: Examining the Function of the Gaze in Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor* and *Jane Eyre*. (Under the direction of Leila S. May)

In this thesis, I use G.W.F. Hegel's notions of self-consciousness and self-awareness to examine the function of the lover's gaze in two of Charlotte Brontë's early novels, *The Professor* and *Jane Eyre*. The first chapter of the thesis discusses William Crimsworth's intimate relationship with two women, Mademoiselle Zoraide Reuter and Frances Evans Henri. The first relationship with Mademoiselle Reuter does not result in a balance of power, but is essential in understanding his relationship with Frances, which does ultimately result in a balance of power. The second chapter of the thesis discusses the relationship of Fairfax Rochester and Jane Eyre. While this relationship is fraught with a great deal of complexity, I argue that ultimately Jane and Rochester achieve a balance of power in the gaze. Through the discussion of the lover's gaze in each of these novels, I demonstrate that, contrary to Jean-Paul Sartre's influential but very negative rendering of the power dynamics implicit in the gaze, in Brontë's works

we see an affirmative, mutual reinforcing exchange in the lover's gaze.

**Identity is in the Eye of the Beholder: Examining  
the Function of the Gaze in Charlotte Bronte's *The  
Professor and Jane Eyre***

By  
**Elizabeth Michelle Whittington**

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
North Carolina State University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

**English**

Raleigh

2004

**Approved By:**

---

Dr. Sharon Setzer

---

Dr. Patricia Lynne

---

Dr. Leila May (Chair of Advisory Committee)

**DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis, as the culmination of my Masters of Arts in English studies, to the cherished memory of my grandparents: R.J. Whittington, Mildred Whittington, Bernard Abey, and Essie Genevieve Abey.

## BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth Michelle Whittington was born on June 27, 1979 in Greensboro, NC. At the age of five, she and her family moved to Weems, VA, where they built a house in her grandparent's back yard. Except for the first half of kindergarten, Elizabeth received her early education in the public schools of Lancaster County. In May of 2001, Elizabeth graduated from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, earning her Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies. After spending a month in Europe, Elizabeth relocated to Raleigh, NC to pursue her graduate degree in English. After completing her thesis and earning her Masters of Arts, she plans to assume a full-time teaching position at Saint Mary's School in Raleigh, NC.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to Dr. Leila May, my director, for her continued patience and support. She has been a source of inspiration, both academically and personally. Dr. May is someone I will always respect and admire. I have learned much from her as both a student and a teaching assistant. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Patricia Lynne, both for serving on this committee and for teaching me to be a better teacher. I am also indebted to Dr. Sharon Setzer--for her input during this process and for insight into the academic world.

I owe more thanks than I can express here to my parents and my sister for their encouragement to pursue a graduate education. Thanks also to my friends: Ann's thesis bootcamp, which allowed me the time and space to truly immerse myself in this project, Carolyn's philosophy that a "little bit loco can keep me sane," and Amy's relentless encouragement all served me well.

Unfortunately, there is not space to list every person who has touched this project in some way. But, I want to thank all those friends and family members who would not let me quit.

**Table of Contents**

	Page
Introduction	1
Chapter One	7
The Evolution of the Gaze in the Eye of a Man: Examining the Function of the Gaze in Charlotte Brontë's <i>The Professor</i>	
Chapter 2	23
From the Look Behind the Curtain to Mutual Gazing: Examining the Function of the Gaze in Charlotte Brontë's <i>Jane Eyre</i>	
Conclusion	45
List of References	49

## Introduction

### **Identity is in the Eye of the Beholder: Examining the Function of the Gaze in Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor* and *Jane Eyre***

Charlotte Brontë is an author whose works are filled with countless references to the gaze. An examination of Brontë's personal life reveals her own struggle with issues of sight. In her article, "In Defense of Vision: The Eye in *Jane Eyre*," Janet Gezari writes: "[Brontë] had long been anxious about her eyesight, [it was] always weak and represented by her as an obstacle to a career as a writer . . ." (60). We hear Brontë's own voice in a letter to Monsieur Heger: "my sight is too weak to write.--Were I to write much I should become blind. This weakness of sight is a terrible hindrance to me" (quoted in Gezari 60). It is this fear of losing her sight that translates into numerous visual references on the pages of her novels when she finally does begin to write. For Brontë, issues of vision were complex and fraught with paradox. Gezari concludes, "She wrote her early tales with her eyes closed, and she frequently suggests that some refusal of ordinary sight is required for access to 'the divine, silent, unseen

land of thought'" (61). By closing her eyes, Brontë felt that she could physically protect her weak sight as well as access the land of the imaginary. Though Brontë quite clearly demonstrates her fascination with the gaze, she is not unique in this matter. Writers and philosophers dating back to historical periods well before Brontë's life have harbored the same fascination.

In his history of the gaze, Martin Jay calls particular attention to Jean-Paul Sartre. He writes, "Many subsequent contributors to the denigration of vision, such as Lacan, Foucault, and Irigaray, cannot, for all their obvious differences be understood without recognizing the residues of Sartre's critique in theirs" (Jay 282). Sartre sees the object of the gaze as the gaze's victim. "'I am possessed by the Other,' Sartre writes [in *Being and Nothingness*]: 'the Other's look fashions my body in its nakedness, causes it to be born, sculpts it, produces it as it is, sees it as I shall never see it. The Other holds a secret--the secret of what I am'" (quoted in Jay 292). This secret is the key to unlocking the mystery of our identities and place in the world. As individuals we exist

in a world that we recognize as our own, existing solely for us. Our identity, our basic existence, is there because we claim it to be. That is true until one's eye meets the eye of another. Sartre's view is that when I discover myself as the object of the Other's gaze, I experience a loss of subjectivity, a loss of selfhood. I am not in agreement with Sartre's negative view, believing, instead, that the gaze of the Other is potentially the positive ground for self-identity.

I argue that it is not until we experience the gaze of the Other that our identity is validated. Support for my view can be found in G.W.F. Hegel who was, perhaps, the most prominent theorist to address the issues of self-consciousness in his *Phenomenology of the Mind*. He begins, "Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say; it is only by being acknowledged or 'recognized'" (Hegel 229). This acknowledgement or recognition occurs through the look of the Other. The gaze, then, plays an essential role in controlling the fate of our identity.

As Hegel claims, without the acknowledgement of the Other, we do not discover ourselves as an individual among individuals. Our identities must be validated from outside of our own minds in order to affirm a position or status in the world. Sartre argues, "If there is an Other, whatever or whoever he may be, whatever may be his relations with me, and without his acting upon me in any way except by the pure upsurge of this being--then I have an outside, I have a nature" (239). The act of being gazed upon, then, is a frightening reality as much as it is an affirmative, uplifting experience.

Despite the power of the Other's gaze to bestow identity on us, ironically in the look/gaze, we no longer exist for ourselves. As a gazer or a gazed, one ceases to protect one's identity and becomes vulnerable to the eye of another. This is true for both the gazer and the gazed, because in a mutual exchange of gazes both individuals are actively participating in what Hegel and Sartre construe as a power struggle, in which the psychic wholeness of each contestant is at risk. For Hegel, the process is historical, both individually and culturally. We must struggle through periods of "slavery" and "mastery" before

we arrive at a democratic equilibrium of mutual acknowledgement and recognition.

It is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained; only thus is it tried and proved that the essential nature of self-consciousness is not bare existence, is not the merely immediate form in which it at first makes its appearance, is not its mere absorption in the expanse of life. Rather it is thereby guaranteed that there is nothing present but what might be taken as a vanishing moment--that self-consciousness is merely pure self-existence, being-for-self. The individual, who has not staked his life, may, no doubt, be recognized as a Person; but he has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness. (Hegel 233)

Although he does not foreground gender issues, Hegel's understanding of the master-slave dialectic is in some ways consistent with Ann Kaplan's critique of the gaze as a predominantly masculine form of female objectification. In

"Is the Gaze Male?" E. Ann Kaplan argues that "the gaze is not necessarily male (literally), but to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the masculine position" (319).

Kaplan, then, concedes that a woman can be in the position of gazer but by doing so she assumes a masculine role.

Although the male gaze does exist, I will argue that the gaze initiates a power dynamic whose outcome is not necessarily the relegation of the "object" to the passive (therefore, feminine) role. The gazer, instead of gaining power over the gazed, releases power resulting in an arguably equal balance of power between the gazer and the gazed. Therefore, whether male or female, the issue of total control of power is, potentially, non-existent.

For Brontë's lovers, the issue of the gaze results in a merger of consciousness and awareness of the Other. My reading of the lover's gaze in Brontë's text will closely follow Hegel's notions of the struggle to establish equilibrium, and in doing so, my account of the function of the gaze will prove to be more positive than Sartre's or that of many recent feminist theorists who have based their work on his.

## Chapter One

### **The Evolution of the Gaze in the Eye of a Man: Examining the Function of the Gaze in Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor***

Charlotte Brontë's first novel, *The Professor*, completed around 1846, offers a fertile ground for investigation of the idea of the gaze in nineteenth-century England. In her introduction to the novel, Heather Glen points out that "almost as prominent in the novel as its imagery of antagonism is the imagery of looking and being looked at" (16). For this work, I will specifically examine the intimate relationship of William Crimsworth with two women, Mademoiselle Zoraide Reuter and Frances Evans Henri.

After escaping an oppressive existence working for his brother, William Crimsworth flees to Brussels to assume a teaching post. His position in the classroom becomes increasingly complex when he assumes a second job at Mademoiselle Reuter's school. Attracted to her physical position of power as his directress, Crimsworth immediately becomes enamored with Mademoiselle Reuter. He says, "My eyes had a pleasure in looking at Mademoiselle Reuter,

especially now, when the twilight softened her features a little, and, in the doubtful dusk, I could fancy her forehead as open as it was really elevated, her mouth touched with turns of sweetness as well as defined in lines of sense" (Brontë 109). His developing feelings for Mademoiselle Reuter place Crimsworth in a very vulnerable position. As the directress of the girl's school, Mademoiselle Reuter naturally has power over Crimsworth. In "Material Interiority in Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor*," William A. Cohen argues that "the narrative contravenes even the pretense of ordinary romance in this courtship game *manqué*: gender distinctions are thrown over in favor of the more salient order of penetration, which positions Mademoiselle Reuter and Crimsworth in respective roles of dominance and submission"(456). Cohen clearly believes that Reuter assumes the masculine role. However, as their relationship develops, there is a continuing struggle to gain a sense of power in the gaze, each resisting the relationship that seems to be naturally developing.

For Crimsworth, loving Mademoiselle Reuter is an impossibility. In "We Have Learnt to Love Her More than Her Books: The Critical Reception of Brontë's *Professor*," Catherine Malone even argues that "[Mademoiselle Reuter's] 'infatuation' is indeed known only to Crimsworth because it existed only in his mind" (179). She is a woman of station, power, and influence. He is a lowly professor with no money, no stature, and no standing in the community. However, they each seem to seek something in the other to validate these positions and invalidate the opportunity for any romance. As they sit in the garden, Crimsworth reflects on their mutual gazing:

Her eyes reverted continually to my face. Her glances were not given in full, but out of the corners, so quietly, so stealthily, yet I think I lost not one. I watched her keenly as she watched me; I perceived soon that she was feeling after my real character; she was searching for salient points, and weak points, and eccentric points; she was applying now this test, now that, hoping in the end to find some chink, some niche, where she could put in

her little firm foot and stand upon my neck--  
mistress of my nature. (Brontë 118)

Mademoiselle Reuter desperately seeks to establish and reaffirm her position of power and control. However, the mutual gaze does not allow her to do so. Instead, what we see is a give and take, a true struggle for balance of power between Mademoiselle Reuter and William Crimsworth, both fighting to maintain their identity and control over their own beings. The very fact that they watch each other signifies equality in the look. This complex relationship can be seen quite clearly in Alan Rauch's *Useful Knowledge*, where Rauch discusses Charlotte's use of the bildungsroman. He writes, "Brontë's novels look at social hierarchies in an effort to suggest ways of overcoming estrangement. Brontë's studies of 'real life' are calculated to create an atmosphere that begins to eliminate the traditional barriers between the classes" (Rauch 138). While the gaze does not totally erase their social standings, it does begin to offer a forum for mutual acknowledgement and balance of power. So, despite their obvious distinctions in social standing, Mademoiselle Reuter and Crimsworth find themselves searching the Other for some larger truth.

Ultimately, the budding relationship crumbles under the knowledge of Mademoiselle Reuter's engagement with Monsieur Pelet. Crimsworth desperately seeks to read something in Mademoiselle Reuter's eye in order to re-establish that connection--that bond. He recalls, "I met her eye too in full--obliging her to give me a straightforward look; this last test went against me: it left her as it found her--moderate, temperate, tranquil; me it disappointed" (Brontë 119). When Mademoiselle Reuter and Crimsworth are faced with the reality that their romance cannot continue, their act of mutual gazing disintegrates. Crimsworth retains his power in the classroom. And, Mademoiselle Reuter retains her position of power and control over Crimsworth as the directress of the girl's school. At times they seem to desire much more. Crimsworth decides, "I will renew my observations. She knows that I watch her: how calm she is under scrutiny! it seems rather to gratify than annoy her" (Brontë 138). Despite the knowledge of the unpractical nature of any continuing relationship, strong feelings remain, and Crimsworth finds himself compelled to gaze upon Mademoiselle Reuter. The discussion becomes increasingly

interesting when we see the development of a genuine attraction and love that ultimately overrides any remaining feelings Crimsworth might retain for Mademoiselle Reuter.

At the insistence of Mademoiselle Reuter, Crimsworth allows Frances, the lace-mending teacher, to enter his classroom for English instruction. The initial exchanges are awkward and forced for them both. In fact, Kai-chong Cheung argues, in "The Chinese Scholar--Beauty Romance and Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor*," that "the pupil who is to become his favorite--or, so to speak, his beauty--is already in his class, but her admirable qualities are not registered through the passing glance he at first permits himself" (342). Crimsworth approaches Frances with a very antagonistic attitude. Any pet project of Mademoiselle Reuter is sure to be met with nothing but animosity from him. Frances is a very meek, confused young woman. On her first day of class, Crimsworth

gave a short exercise. . . . the new pupil was puzzled at first with the novelty of the form and language; once or twice she looked at me with a sort of painful solicitude, as not

comprehending at all what I meant; then she was not ready when the others were, she could not write her phrases so fast as they did; I would not help her. (Brontë 152)

It appears almost as if Crimsworth feels he has something to prove to Mademoiselle Reuter by being especially demanding towards her new student. Despite Frances's pain and puzzlement, Crimsworth "went on relentless" (Brontë 152). He continues:

She looked at me; her eye said most plainly, 'I cannot follow you.' I disregarded the appeal. . . . glancing from time to time with a *nonchalant* air out of the window, I dictated a little faster. On looking towards her again, I perceived her face clouded with embarrassment. . . . shame and discomfiture were apparent in her countenance. . . . I took their books; it was with a reluctant hand Mademoiselle Henri gave up hers, but, having once yielded it to my possession, she composed

her anxious face, as if, for the present, she had resolved to dismiss regret, and had made up her mind to be thought unprecedentedly stupid.

Glancing over her exercises, I found that several lines had been omitted, but what was written contained very few faults; I instantly inscribed 'Bon' at the bottom of the page and returned it to her. (Brontë 152)

The initial "relationship" between Crimsworth and Frances develops rather innocently. For reasons that even he is not initially aware of, Crimsworth means to press and push Frances beyond her limits. In this passage, what is especially striking is the communication of the look. He perceives a student filled with "embarrassment, shame, and discomfiture." Crimsworth's examination of Frances's look also reveals a determined, resolute young woman. Despite this embarrassment, Frances "composed her anxious face . . . resolved to dismiss regret." It is not only her book that Frances yields to Crimsworth's possession, but ultimately her very identity and perception of reality.

Crimsworth reads a great deal into Frances's character based upon her eye and the examination of her look. Brontë foreshadows the growth and development of the individual through the gaze.

Initially, despite his desire to be otherwise, it is impossible for Crimsworth to maintain total hostility towards Frances. And, Frances is clearly not comfortable in her gazing upon Crimsworth. Observing her countenance, Crimsworth remarks, "She smiled, at first incredulously, then as if reassured, but did not lift her eyes; she could look at me, it seemed, when perplexed and bewildered, but not when gratified; I thought that scarcely fair" (Brontë 152). Her fears of inadequacy play out in the classroom. Frances is not confident in her study of the English language, just as she is not secure in her ability to form a mutual, loving relationship with Crimsworth. Just as Mademoiselle Reuter maintains a physical position of power over Crimsworth as his directress, so too does Crimsworth maintain a physical position of power over Frances as her teacher. Rauch observes,

Early in the novel, Crimsworth tells the reader that he watched Frances 'much as a

gardener watches the growth of a precious plant.'

He considers himself in terms of the

'gardener who contributes to the development of his favourite,' but Frances is too self-reliant and independent to become fully domesticated.

(152)

It is only through the gaze that they are equalized. Frances seeks his gaze in moments of confusion, searching for some sort of assurance. In Crimsworth's eyes, she seeks the validation of her existence. Frances needs to know that she will not merely melt into the small desk and be forever forgotten because she does not perceive herself to be on the same level as the other students. At the end of the exercise, Crimsworth judges these actions. How could she be so bold as to seek his eye in moments of need? But, when given reassurance or validation, she is entirely too meek to meet his eye with her own. Cohen argues, "[Crimsworth] is the agent of Frances's blossoming who helps externalize her inner qualities, yet even as he assists her he keeps up the guard on his own interior:

each is veiled to the other and yet visible beneath the veil" (464). A relationship constructed through the gaze must slowly mature, even as one physically and mentally matures. Nothing seems to be instantaneous, which is why equality of power in the mutual gaze is a power struggle.

In time, the reader is privy to Frances and Crimsworth's relationship as it is developing in the classroom. While we, as readers, are allowed a private glimpse into what is developing, Mademoiselle Reuter too remains privy to the passing glances and the obvious praise. Despite her engagement to another man, Mademoiselle Reuter adamantly refuses to relinquish her perceived control over Crimsworth. Because of this, Frances mysteriously disappears, leaving Crimsworth seeking her out for months. Crimsworth reflects on how his gaze for Mademoiselle Reuter has been altered: "When I looked at her, it was with the glance fitting to be bestowed on one who I knew had consulted jealousy as an adviser, and employed treachery as an instrument--the glance of quiet disdain and rooted distrust" (Brontë 187). Instead of a look of love and adoration, Crimsworth's gaze has mutated into a look of judgment. Mademoiselle Reuter, then,

successfully separates the two young lovers for quite a bit of time. When they finally do meet, true love and passion are realized through a mutual exchange of gazes.

I believe the wonder of what--the consciousness of who it was that thus stole unawares on her solitude, had passed through her brain, and flashed into her heart. . . . Amazement had hardly opened her eyes and raised them to mine, ere Recognition informed their irids with most speaking brightness. . . . most vivid joy shone clear and warm on her whole countenance. I had hardly time to observe that she was wasted and pale, ere called to feel a responsive inward pleasure by the sense of most full and exquisite pleasure glowing in the animated flush, and shining in the expansive light, now diffused over my pupil's face . . . . I loved with passion the light of Frances Evans' clear hazel eye when it did not fear to look straight into mine.

(Brontë 195)

In this moment Frances and Crimsworth realize who they are as individuals existing for each other. The flash of

recognition illuminates the developing relationship and search for identity. Without each other and the Other's gaze, they do not exist. "The consciousness of who it was" for Frances is not merely a recognition of Crimsworth standing before her; this flash of awareness is a realization of both Crimsworth and herself. For the first time in their developing relationship, they are able to peer into the Other's eye and see a reflection of themselves. At this moment, Frances and Crimsworth submit themselves to the vulnerability of the Other's gaze. Finally, Frances does not fear to meet Crimsworth's eye in moments of struggle. As Hegel argues, their individual existences have ceased to be and they now exist one for the Other.

Self-consciousness has before it another self-consciousness; it has come outside itself. This has a double significance. First it has lost its own self, since it finds itself as an *other* being; secondly, it has thereby sublated that other, for it does not regard the other

as essentially real, but sees its own self in the other. (Hegel 229)

The gaze of the Other has transformed Frances and Crimsworth's identity as individuals.

Thus we see that for Charlotte Brontë only through love can the objectifying gaze be transmogrified into a mutual exchange of vulnerability, acceptability, and enlightenment. When we initially see Frances and Crimsworth in the classroom, there is a struggle to define boundaries and positions. It is during the moment in the graveyard when each is completely vulnerable, physically and emotionally, that they submit their identities one to another through the gaze of love. As Brontë writes, "recognition informed their irids with most speaking brightness." When Crimsworth and Frances allow themselves to be vulnerable to the gaze of each other, they begin to rethink their basic identities, recognizing a newfound self in the Other.

While in the throes of love, individuals find themselves altered, changed, often for the better. At the very least love brings out qualities in each of us that we

did not know existed. Love, specifically the lover's gaze, functions this way for Crimsworth and Frances. One must always return to the eye, the gaze of the Other. Slightly prior to their marriage, Crimsworth takes a moment to reflect upon his earlier observation of Frances.

I know not whether Frances was really much altered since the time I first saw her; but, as I looked at her now, I felt that she was singularly changed for me; the sad eye, the pale cheek, the dejected and joyless countenance I remembered as her early attributes were quite gone, and now I saw a face dressed in graces; smile, dimple, and rosy tint rounded its contours and brightened its hues. (Brontë 251)

Crimsworth is finally able to see what William Roscoe terms "decidedly the most attractive female character that ever came from the pen of this author" (quoted in Malone 181). Love and Crimsworth's gaze have altered Frances's identity in some way, because it is through Crimsworth's gaze that the true Frances is able to emerge.

Throughout the course of the novel, we see the growth and development of two primary characters. The gaze functions in Crimsworth and Mademoiselle Reuter's relationship as a catalyst for Crimsworth's continual growth and search for identity. However, we do not see any genuine alterations in Mademoiselle Reuter. It is only the relationship of Crimsworth and Frances that proves to be truly extraordinary over the course of the novel. The two lovers mature and develop through the eyes of the Other. Who Frances is as a wife and a mother is evident only to us because of Crimsworth's gaze. And, ultimately, the man that Crimsworth becomes is due solely to his relationship (through the gaze) to Frances. Crimsworth reflects, "her look and movement were like inspiration" (Brontë 280). Frances's gaze inspired Crimsworth to allow his true identity to be revealed.

Charlotte Brontë consistently explores the power of the gaze through the lovers in each of her novels. She continues the trend in *Jane Eyre*. A study of the gaze in Charlotte's second novel reveals much continuity in the lover's gaze.

## Chapter Two

### **From the Look Behind the Curtain to Mutual Gazing: Examining the Function of the Gaze in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre***

Charlotte Brontë's second novel, *Jane Eyre*, provides ample avenues for continuing my discussion of the gaze and formation of identity. Because one can see many strands of Charlotte's own experience in the novel, it is often considered largely autobiographical. I believe that it is Charlotte's personal fascination with the eye that leads her to capture so much of her character's personality through the look. In his discussion of the function of the gaze in *Jane Eyre*, Peter J. Bellis sets the stage for Charlotte's journey to beginning the writing process: "She began the novel in August 1846, in Manchester, where her father was recovering from cataract surgery. The operation would either restore his failing eyesight or leave him completely blind; the family economic future depended on the outcome. It was at this moment, with her father lying immobilized in a darkened room, that *Jane Eyre* was begun" (649). We come to realize that, in this context, the very idea of vision is emotionally charged for Brontë. Because

her personal life was fraught with many complexities of vision, it is no wonder, then, that virtually every page of *Jane Eyre* includes a reference to the gaze.

Unlike scholarship dealing with Charlotte's first novel, more scholarship has attempted to address the use of the gaze in *Jane Eyre*. In her article, "In Defense of Vision: The Eye in *Jane Eyre*," Janet Gezari shows herself to be one of the critics who discovers autobiographical strands in *Jane Eyre*. Gezari sees two pivotal events in Brontë's life as contributing to the creation of *Jane Eyre*. She writes, "*Jane Eyre* registers these two events--the denial of Brontë's vision as a writer (*The Professor* had just been rejected for publication) and the threat to her father's sight--not only in one of its central events, the blinding of Rochester, but also in its representation of seeing, being the object of sight, and looking as the essential forms of relatedness at every stage of Jane Eyre's experience" (Gezari 59). Just as *The Professor* details Crimsworth's growth and maturity through the gaze, *Jane Eyre* chronicles this same development for Jane. Gezari's brief article is rich with analysis explaining the

increasing interest in texts such as *Jane Eyre*. She concludes, "Seeing in *Jane Eyre* opens up questions of power, property, and propriety in ways that help explain this novel's eccentric relation to the tradition of the English novel and justify its perennial interest for feminist critics" (Gezari 62). It seems clear, then, that the gaze functions in a very complex arena. The gaze is not merely about exchanging power or control, but, especially in the case of the lover's gaze, serves as a pathway to true identity. Both parties, gazer and gazed, bestow identity on the other by mutually acknowledging each other.

In her introduction to the Penguin Edition of *Jane Eyre*, Erica Jong observes,

[Jane] cannot marry Rochester until he knows he is dependent on her as she is on him.

Their odysseys have *equalized* them: Jane has become an independent woman and Rochester has been cured of entitlement. Only thus can a woman and man become equals in patriarchal society.

(ix, emphasis mine)

But, it is not just a physical odyssey that Jane and Rochester set out upon. For these two lovers, the journey is about much more than the discovery of wealth and the shedding of a lunatic wife. The true odyssey of *Jane Eyre* is provoked and guided by a series of visual observations that the main characters make of each other. This series of gazes has an historical development that guides the plot.

The novel opens with Jane Eyre as a young child being subjected to the torture of a family who does not love or care for her, but only views her presence as a barrier to their desire to be counted among the aristocracy. Even the servants describe Jane as "a tiresome, ill-conditioned child, who always looked as if she were watching everybody, and scheming plots underhand" (Brontë 15). Jane constantly seems to be causing turmoil despite her best efforts to remain inconspicuous. One of the most memorable scenes in the whole of *Jane Eyre* is the red room incident. The scene begins with Jane receiving a thrashing from her cousin, John Reed, who "was not quick either of vision or conception" (Brontë 8). After a blow to the head, Jane is told, "That is for your impudence in answering mamma awhile

since. . . . and for your sneaking way of getting behind curtains, and for the *look* you had in your eyes two minutes since. . . ." (Brontë 9, emphasis mine). At a very young age, Jane learns the lesson that the look is to be feared and shied away from. The same scene reveals a moment where Jane searches to discover who or what she truly is. As she crosses the room Jane passes a mirror:

My fascinated glance involuntarily explored the depth it revealed. All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality: and the strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking a gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit. . . .

(Brontë 13)

Her own identity, her own presence, is so foreign to her that she does not even recognize the likeness of herself when confronted with it head on. Her very existence seems to be supernatural. Freya Johnson analyzes the red room incident in her article "The Male Gaze and the Struggle Against Patriarchy in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*." She speculates,

Jane so little understands her internal self, free from the definition of Others, that she does not recognize the reflection of herself, thereby missing what is, according to Jacques Lacan, the most decisive stage of human development, when one, through consciousness of one's own reflection, recognizes oneself as an object of knowledge. Although the reflection is static, and thereby a misrepresentation, it still confers the mark of adulthood--self-consciousness--which Jane is unable to attain at this point in her development. (Johnson 23)

Seeing herself in the mirror should be a great moment of recognition for Jane, according to Lacan and his discussion of the mirror stage; instead we see her questioning the image that is her own. Does she exist merely as some supernatural apprehension or a real little girl with genuine feelings and emotions? A fiend or a child? This moment inevitably hinders Jane's ability to gaze, revealing her lack of self-consciousness at this stage of her life. If she were truly comfortable and aware of her identity,

passing the mirror would be a moment of self-recognition, rather than questioning.

Jane's shipment to a boarding school finally allows her the opportunity to start afresh with no one carrying preconceived notions about her state as a child or a demon. No one that is, except for Mr. Brocklehurst whom Mrs. Reed has informed of Jane's worrisome habits. Jane expresses her concern at their first meeting:

I dimly perceived that she was already  
obliterating hope from the new phase of existence  
which she was destined for me to enter; I felt,  
though I could not have expressed the feeling,  
that she was sowing aversion and unkindness along  
my future path; I saw myself transformed under  
Mr. Brocklehurst's eye into an artful, obnoxious  
child, and what could I do to remedy the injury?

(Brontë 33)

Once again, a menacing gaze hinders Jane's early development. In Mr. Brocklehurst's eye, a perception of Jane's identity forms. She is not given the opportunity to present herself, but is assigned an identity through Mrs. Reed and Mr. Brocklehurst's judgment. The lesson that the

gaze is destructive and to be feared is further reinforced at this moment. During her tenure at Lowood, Jane is free from the critical eye of Mr. Brocklehurst. However, when he does appear before the school, he makes it a point to segregate Jane from the rest of the girls. As she stands before the entire assembly of young women, bearing the fate she once thought impossible, she muses,

I . . . was now exposed to a general view on a pedestal of infamy. What my sensations were, no language can describe; but just as they all arose, stifling my breath and constricting my throat, a girl came up and passed me: in passing, she lifted her eyes. (Brontë 67)

That girl is Jane's pinnacle of strength, Helen Burns. Through Helen's glance, Jane is given the strength to endure what she had once termed unendurable. At this moment, then, Jane receives some hope and encouragement in the form of a gaze. In "I Read It in Your Eyes: Spiritual Vision in *Jane Eyre*," Amanda B. Witt argues, "Neither here, nor elsewhere, does Jane show any distinction between male gazers and female gazers; she shows no tendency to fear the male gaze more than the female gaze or vice versa" (30).

Thus we see a lack of any gender-influenced biases for Jane when it comes to the gaze.

As the novel progresses, we see a shift to Jane's most significant relationship. Jane and Rochester's first encounter occurs without either knowing the true identity of the Other. On the road to Thornfield Hall, Rochester has an accident, giving Jane the opportunity to offer assistance and observe his physical form. She describes every detail of his appearance, from his clothing to his "dark face, with stern features and a heavy brow; his eyes and gathered eyebrows looked ireful and thwarted" (Brontë 115). Though her description is not one of a handsome, young, noble man in a romantic, idyllic setting, she admits, "I felt no fear of him, and but little shyness" (Brontë 115). Jane's impression of Rochester is less than wholly favorable; however, there is something about him that truly enchants her, causing her to extend the gaze. At a later point, Jane pays special attention to Rochester's eyes, the organs that reveal the soul. She muses, "he had great, dark eyes, and very fine eyes, too-- not without a certain change in their depths sometimes, which, if it was not softness reminded you, at least, of

that feeling" (Brontë 133). Something in Rochester's eyes causes Jane to trust him and become enamored of him.

Shortly after this initial encounter and the realization of the Other's position, Jane is called to spend time with Rochester in the library, a scene that scholarship has largely ignored. In his article, "In the Window-Seat: Vision and Power in *Jane Eyre*," Peter J. Bellis structures his argument around three crucial visual exchanges in the novel. However, he neglects to mention what I consider to be the first significant visual encounter between Jane and Rochester. Jane recalls, "He had been looking two minutes, at the fire, and I had been looking the same length of time at him, when, turning suddenly, he caught my gaze fastened on his physiognomy. 'You examine me, Miss Eyre. . .'" (Brontë 133). This is the first moment that Jane truly searches Rochester's countenance to reveal clues, not only about his identity but also about her own. When Rochester catches Jane gazing upon him, she is caught in a moment of vulnerability. Her very boldness to gaze upon her master reveals a strength and stubbornness of character. And, the fact that Rochester stares at the fire is no small coincidence. I

contend that that look is representative of the developing passion rising between the two beings. Recognizing Jane's penetrating gaze, Rochester becomes an active party in the exchange, addressing Jane:

There is something singular about you, said he:  
'you have the air of a little nonnette, quaint,  
quiet, grave, and simple, as you sit with your  
hands before you, and your eyes generally bent on  
the carpet (except, by-the-by, when they are  
directed piercingly to my face; as just now, for  
instance)'. . . . (Brontë 133)

Jane's gaze is not a casual glance. As Rochester notices, her eyes are "directed piercingly to" his face. This is indicative of a deep examination and search for further clues to the identity of each. So begins the playful and mysterious exchange of glances. Rochester and Jane seem to be searching the other for something that is impossible for them to find within. In his philosophical discussion of self-consciousness, *The Phenomenology of the Mind*, Hegel argues, "Each is the mediating term to the other, through which each mediates and unites itself with itself; and each

is to itself and to the other an immediate self-existing reality, which, at the same time, exists thus for itself only through this mediation. They recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another" (231). Jane and Rochester are beginning their journey of seeking identity and validation in the Other's eye. As the novel continues, we see that Jane and Rochester can only find true happiness and existence in and for the Other. Through this existence, Jane and Rochester struggle to establish their self-identity in response to the gaze.

But the journey has only begun. The ensuing relationship becomes increasingly complicated after the attempt on Rochester's life by his lunatic wife, Bertha Mason. Naturally, Jane is not aware of Rochester's marriage. Frightened by her developing feelings, Jane begins a covert observation of her master; thus we see her desiring to "see without being seen" (Brontë 168). Unwilling to open herself up to that vulnerability and examination, Jane resumes her watch of Rochester from hidden corners, behind curtains. She seems, then, unwilling to submit to the exploration of her own identity. By observing Rochester on her own terms, Jane feels somehow

secure in her place and her own identity. While Rochester entertains ladies of society, Jane notes:

I might gaze without being observed. . . . my eyes were drawn involuntarily to his face: I could not keep their lids under control: they would rise and the irids would fix on him. I looked, and had an acute pleasure in looking,--a precious yet poignant pleasure; pure gold, with a steely point of agony: a pleasure like what the thirst-perishing man might feel who knows the well to which he has crept is poisoned yet stoops and drinks divine draughts nevertheless. (Brontë 177)

"Pleasure in looking?" How could Jane as a woman experience "pleasure in looking"? According to Luce Irigaray, a prominent feminist psychoanalytic critic, "The predominance of the visual . . . is particularly foreign to female eroticism. . . . Woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking" (quoted in Bellis 639). For Jane the gaze continues to be "a steely point of agony." Each look is filled with a combination of pleasure and pain. This reinforces the dualistic nature of the gaze. It

truly can be both a joyous and painful experience. The issue is not only one of erotic pleasure but primarily of pleasure in discovery. Through her gaze, Jane is discovering not only a developing love for Rochester but recognizing the reality of who she is. This pleasure in discovery is the impetus for Jane's continuing observation and search for mutual love and respect. It is this developing love that shapes Jane's identity through the gaze. Jane reflects:

Most true is it that 'beauty is in the eye of the gazer.' My master's colourless, olive face, square, massive brow, broad and jetty eyebrows, deep eyes, strong features, firm, grim mouth . . . were not beautiful, they were full of an interest, an influence that quite mastered me,--that took my feelings from my own power and fettered them in his. (Brontë 177)

Accepting the cliché that "Beauty is in the eye of the Beholder," Jane sees inner beauty in what society would consider an ugly man. This true beauty is revealed to Jane only through a genuine gaze. In order to gaze upon

Rochester in this manner, Jane is metaphorically dying, by allowing her identity to be vulnerable to the look of the Other. Her self-consciousness is completely vulnerable to another. Just as she relinquishes power and control to Rochester, she gains power and control over Rochester. During Jane and Rochester's odyssey toward discovering their own identities the ensuing love develops. As she watches him at a party Jane reflects,

I had not intended to love him: the reader knows  
I had wrought hard to extirpate from my soul the  
germs of love there detected; and  
now, at the first renewed view of him, they  
spontaneously revived, green and strong! He made  
me love him without looking at me. (Brontë 177)

Many critics would, undoubtedly, argue that it is Rochester who maintains the control. If Jane is falling in love with this man without a simple glance from him, where is her power? Her power exists in the very act of making herself vulnerable and realizing Rochester's own vulnerability. Rochester is gazed upon, seemingly unaware, and Jane is seemingly taking advantage of that. Jane realizes that

there is a loss of self and control when submitted herself to a lover. But, it is the realization that it is a risk and indulgence for them both that equalizes the power struggle. Therefore, there is a mutual vulnerability and acknowledgement, each submitting to the Other.

In a scene that few critics are able to ignore, Rochester verbalizes the discoveries that both he and Jane have made through the gaze. During the fortuneteller scene Rochester, disguised as the mysterious fortuneteller, reads Jane's eye:

It looks soft and full of feeling; it smiles at my jargon: it is susceptible; impression follows impression through its clear sphere; where it ceases to smile, it is sad; an unconscious lassitude weighs on the lid: that signifies melancholy resulting from loneliness. It turns from me; it will not suffer further scrutiny; it seems to deny, by a mocking glance, the truth of the discoveries I have already made,--to disown the charge both of sensibility and chagrin: its pride and reserve only confirm me in my opinion. The eye is favourable. (Brontë 203-204)

Rochester has been able to deduce a great deal of Jane's character by reading her eye, her glance. The complexity of Jane's feelings for Rochester is revealed. Despite her "pride" and "sensibility," Jane is "full of feeling" for Rochester. However, seeing his developing relationship with Blanche Ingram causes her a great deal of "melancholy" and "loneliness." The lessons of her past have taught her to "turn from" Rochester's glance so as not to "suffer further scrutiny." The truth of who Jane is and how she feels can all be found in a look. Jane is not a simplistic creature. As Rochester's analysis reveals, she is an incredibly complex, even contradictory being. Acting as an anonymous third party, Rochester reveals to Jane that the secrets she thought were so deeply buried are, in fact, on the surface for all humanity to realize.

As Jane accepts her vulnerability and realizes Rochester's vulnerability, Jane and Rochester slowly begin to establish a mutual exchange of power. Amanda B. Witt argues that "Rochester's goal, then, is to teach Jane to trust the gaze so that she can participate in a healthy,

mutually trusting relationship; were he but worthy of that trust, he might have succeeded" (31). While all seems to be leading up to a storybook ending, Jane and Rochester's initial relationship suffers a disastrous setback.

At these initial stages of Jane and Rochester's developing relationship, their love for each other and, therefore, their mutual gaze still exists on a very immature, underdeveloped level. After his proposal Rochester speaks of adorning Jane with great jewels: "I will clasp the bracelets on these fine wrists, and load these fairy-like fingers with rings" (Brontë 263). Despite the fact that Jane is a beauty in his eyes, Rochester feels the need to alter her outside appearance in order to make her fit society's expectations. He says, "I will make the world acknowledge you a beauty, too" (Brontë 263). This desire to mold Jane into something she is not indicates a love and, therefore, a gaze on a very basic, immature level. This reveals that the gaze still is not entirely genuine because Rochester feels the need to change Jane in the eyes of the world. In this context of manipulation and control, true identity cannot be revealed, and Jane flees to seek out her own path.

After several tumultuous months apart, the two lovers meet again; Rochester has lost his sight, leaving Jane as the only gazer. It is uncommon to encounter a critic who does not address this ending in some fashion. Many agree with Bellis's interpretation of "Rochester's blinding [as] symbolic castration" (647). And, for the majority of psychoanalytic critics, his loss of sight is just that. However, in my view, Rochester's blindness is symbolic of a great deal more in the lover's search for true identity. After their separation the two lovers reunite to gaze upon each other in discovery of their identity together. For Rochester, this gaze is merely symbolic because he cannot literally see. I do not agree with Bette London, however, that this somehow diminishes the power of Jane's gaze throughout the text or signifies a realization of Jane's newfound position of control. In "The Pleasure of Submission: *Jane Eyre* and the Production of the Text," Bette London argues:

Jane's gaze, it would seem, can be authorized only when Rochester can no longer see. . . . In the end, Jane's power comes not from her ability to look at Rochester but rather to

look for him, to be his eyes. . . . With Rochester blinded, she thus perfects her position of instrumentality. (207)

For me, the authority of Jane's gaze cannot be questioned. I believe her gaze is authorized throughout the entirety of her relationship with Rochester, which is evident from the first moments Rochester begins to analyze her look. Jane begins the novel as a confused, young woman. Her physical and emotional growth parallels the development of her use of the gaze. This does not mean that her gaze lacks authority earlier in the novel but merely indicates a developing sense of security and discovery. As I have previously suggested, the journey is a struggle for both Jane and Rochester resulting in an equal balance of power.

Though Rochester remains blind for the first two years of their marriage, he eventually begins to regain his sight.

He had the advice of an eminent oculist; and he eventually recovered the sight of that one eye. . . . the sky is no longer a blank to him--the earth no longer a void. When his first-born was put into his arms, he could see

that the boy had inherited his own eyes, as they once were--large, brilliant, and black. On that occasion, he again, with a full heart, acknowledged that God had tempered judgment with mercy. (Brontë 460)

Rochester's returning sight plays into Brontë's complex relationship to sight. Perhaps it was her personal fears about her father's sight that somehow required her to write in returning sight for her hero. The power dynamics between Jane and Rochester continue to equalize with this returning sight. They each have an equal stake in the relationship, being mutually vulnerable to the look of the Other. Despite the fact that for Rochester vision is limited, their relationship and their gaze transcend the boundaries of the traditional conceptions of the gaze.

Jane's growth, as she negotiates her way through the gaze of the Other and learns to become mistress of her own experience is anything but ordinary. Her relationship with Rochester requires each to be vulnerable to the penetrating look of the Other; without submitting to each other, the relationship never could have flourished. Perhaps Jane

states it most eloquently: "The soul, fortunately, has an interpreter--often an unconscious, but still a truthful interpreter--in the eye. My eye rose to his; and while I looked in his fierce face, I gave an involuntary sigh" (Brontë 323). The sigh is symbolic of releasing herself to the look of another. Time and again we see both Jane and Rochester surrendering and assuming power. And, so, Charlotte Brontë has once again produced a text rich with vivid imagery and symbolism when it comes to the eye and the gaze, revealing that personal identity has no independent status, but exists in the eye of the beholder.

## Conclusion

### Identity is in the Eye of the Beholder: Examining the Function of the Gaze in Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor* and *Jane Eyre*

Many critics who read *Jane Eyre* as largely autobiographical make connections between Brontë's role as an author and Jane's role as an author. In his article, "In the Window-Seat: Vision and Power in *Jane Eyre*," Peter J. Bellis makes this observation,

Jane . . . dominates her relation to the reader: as narrator, she is again the unseen observer, never describing herself in the text. She withholds herself from the reader's critical gaze, making herself visible only indirectly, expressing herself through a veil of words. The omission is at once a function of her narrative position and the basis of her narrative power.

(649)

This sounds like a woman who is afraid to be seen and judged by society, a woman who writes under a pseudonym. By maintaining the role of the unseen observer, Brontë is able to mask her identity in some ways, shielding herself

from what she fears will be harsh judgment. Brontë refuses to allow herself to open up to the vulnerability that the characters in her novel ultimately do chooses instead to live vicariously through the development of her lovers. Unlike her central protagonists in the two novels discussed above, Brontë herself does not learn to achieve a balance of power with the Other, does not learn to express her love, vulnerability and submission to the Other. Rather, she still demands to be the solitary subject of an unobserved gaze that voyeuristically watches others who learn a lesson from their interactions with each other that she, Charlotte Brontë, is incapable of learning for herself.

Questions, then, are raised about Brontë's motivations. Does she seek in her art but not in her life a solution to the problem she has raised about human interaction? Or, is it the case that she fails to learn the lesson from her art that we, her readers, may learn from it? There really can be no answer to these questions raised. To try and discover Brontë's true authorial intentions is an impossibility. However, time and again Brontë seemed to frequently retreat to the imaginary

world of Angria. It would seem then that Brontë is blinded in a way by her creativity. Her desperate need to write and create characters that make momentous discoveries about human interactions blind her to the possibility of finding these discoveries in her own life.

Sartre writes that "the poet tried all his life to turn himself into a thing in the eyes of other people and his own. He wanted to take up a stand at a distance from the great social fete like a statue, like something definitive and opaque which could not be assimilated" (294). Despite her acceptance into the literary cannon, Brontë is anything but assimilated. As an author, poet and individual she stands apart in the world of Victorian literature as do her two novels, *The Professor* and *Jane Eyre*.

Human nature is social in its essence. Self-identity is not something with which we are born, nor does it appear *ex nihilo*. We know who we are by virtue of our relation with the Other, and this knowledge is both grasped and communicated through the gaze.

In *Phenomenology of the Mind*, Hegel writes,

It is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained; only thus is it tried and proved that the essential nature of self-consciousness is not bare existence. . . . The individual, who has not staked his life, may, no doubt, be recognized as a Person; but he has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness. (233)

Hegel's theories about self-identity and awareness are fittingly paired with notions of the gaze. In examining two of Brontë's novels, one can see that the gaze functions in a very similar manner in both works. Each set of lovers (Frances and Crimsworth, Rochester and Jane) struggles to maintain a mutual balance of power and equality through the look. In the end, each individual is more aware of his or her own identity as it is visible in the eye of the Other.

### References

- Bellis, Peter J. "In the Window-Seat: Vision and Power in *Jane Eyre*." *ELH* 54.3(1987): 639-652.
- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. NY: Viking Press, 1972.
- Bronte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. NY: Signet, 1997.
- . *The Professor*. NY: Penguin Books, 1989.
- Cheung, Kai-chong. "The Chinese Scholar-Beauty Romance and Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor*." *The Force of Vision* 1 (1995): 337-334.
- Cohen, William A. "Material Interiority in Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor*." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 57.4 (2003): 443-476.
- Gezari, Janet. *Charlotte Bronte and Defensive Conduct: The Author and the Body at Risk*. Philadelphia: U of Penn Press, 1992.
- Glen, Heather. Introduction. *The Professor*. By Charlotte Brontë: NY: Penguin Books, 1989.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Mind*. Trans. J.B. Baillie. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1910.
- Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkley: U of California Press, 1993.
- Johnson, Freya. "The Male Gaze and the Struggle Against Patriarchy in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*." *Jean Rhys Review* 5.1 (1992): 22-30.
- Jong, Erica. Introduction. *Jane Eyre*. By Charlotte Brontë: NY: Signet, 1997.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. "Is the Gaze Male?" *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*. Ed. Ann Barr Snitow et al. New York: Monthly Review, 1983. 309-327.

- London, Bette. "The Pleasures of Submission: Jane Eyre and the Production of the Text." *ELH* 58.1 (1991): 195-213.
- Malone, Catherine. "'We Have Learnt to Love Her More Than Her Books': The Critical Reception of Brontë's Professor." *The Review of English Studies* 47.186 (1996): 175-187.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. NY: Citadel Press, 1968.
- Witt, Amanda B. "'I Read It in Your Eye': Spiritual Vision in Jane *Eyre*." *Victorian Newsletter* 38.1 (Spring 1994): 29-39.