

Charlotte Brontë's Reading and Charlotte Brontë's Readers

In her *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Elizabeth Gaskell points to the isolation of Charlotte Brontë's upbringing as an excuse for the more scandalous aspects of her work. To some degree, the underlying image of Charlotte Brontë's innocence in ignorance has persisted despite recent scholarship to the contrary. This session will attempt to situate Charlotte Brontë as both reader and writer within the print culture of her age. In doing so, the session will also help to dispell the lingering myth of Charlotte Brontë's provincial isolation and will illuminate some important trends in the history of Charlotte Brontë's reception.

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"Reception as Reflection: How Jane Eyre's Critical Reception Reveals Perceptions of the Victorian Woman Reader"

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This paper will explore how critical reception of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* revealed Victorian attitudes toward women readers in the mid-nineteenth century. The paper explores these attitudes—concentrating mainly on Victorian Britain—which overall projected a perception that women readers (particular young ladies) were emotionally and morally delicate, which thereby justified a sense of patriarchal duty to supervise what women read. Underscoring this perception was a pervasive sense of prudery in Victorian society. The patriarchal duty to supervise women's reading was taken up and reinforced by periodicals, advice manuals, and certain articles, just to name a few examples. Visual art of the period, which includes countless images of the woman reader, also reflects these perceptions, and analyses of two particularly vivid examples are included. The paper then sets Brontë herself within this overall context and analyzes a handful of memorable reviews (both favorable and unfavorable) of *Jane Eyre* within this frame. Reviews include those by Elizabeth Rigby (unfavourable), G. H. Lewes (two reviews, one favourable and one unfavourable), the *Christian Remembrancer* (anonymous, unfavourable), and the *Examiner* (anonymous, favourable). In analyzing these reviews, ample evidence is found that the reviewers (whether consciously or unconsciously) gave special consideration to the potential audience of women readers, which in turn helped skew their critiques in order to address women readers' "limitations."

"Charlotte Bronte's Reading: Before and After Jane Eyre"

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Many scholars have wondered how the Brontes could have been equipped to write the novels they did. Some, like Elizabeth Gaskell, have offered a biographical explanation; in her *Life of Charlotte Bronte*, Gaskell points to the loneliness of the Brontes' provincial existence and the early deaths of Charlotte's siblings as the primary sources of meaning in Charlotte's writing. Several later writers, such as Tom Winnifrith, have provided similar biographical explanations, though Winnifrith's focus on the "humdrum ordinariness" (Brontes 10) of the Brontes' lives leaves more room for individual genius in that Winnifrith implies Charlotte's works cannot be fully explained by her biographical experience.

More recent scholars have challenged this biographical tradition. While some of these scholars, such as Patsy Stoneman and Lucasta Miller, have questioned the validity of the biographical

approach itself, others, such as Juliet Barker, have maintained the biographical approach but have undermined prior assumptions about the Brontës' social and intellectual isolation--in the process making the Brontës' novels appear much less miraculous than the popular myths make them seem. Behind many of Barker's claims lies an implicit assumption that the extent of the Brontës' reading made up for their relatively limited lived experience. In other words, where the bare facts of the Brontës' biographies fail to explain their novels, the Brontës' reading might fill in.

The goal of this paper is to examine Barker's assertion that "Books of every kind were readily available to the Brontë children" at Haworth by studying the wealth of available sources on Charlotte Brontë's reading before and after the publication of *Jane Eyre* ("Haworth" 23). In doing so, I will consider what Charlotte read; how legal and socioeconomic factors may or may not have limited her reading; how she obtained her reading material; and how her reading changed after her literary debut.

Works Cited

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"Charlotte Brontë's Reading and Readers"

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In her *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Elizabeth Gaskell paints an apologetic picture of the writer and points to the isolation of her upbringing and being out of touch with contemporary society and conventions as an explanation for what some reviewers saw as Brontë's "coarse" handling of her subject matters. This image has persisted, although recent scholarship has contested this picture. Taking as its starting point these images that have circulated of Brontë as a writer and reader the paper establishes Brontë within a wider reading and writing culture.

This paper examines Charlotte Brontë's use of reading to create literary meaning in two of her novels: *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. More specifically, it investigates allusions and references to books and other reading material as well as different reading practices exhibited and the relationship between narrator and reader in these two novels. In other words the paper shows that Brontë's use of reading gives us a more nuanced understanding of the writer in relation to contemporary society. To substantiate this, there are references to Brontë's own reading.

With references to reader response theory and other theories regarding the relationship between reader, writer and text, the paper then attempts to establish the various effects the author's use of reading has on her fiction and what this in turn can tell us about the relationship she attempts to create with her historical audience. In doing so, this paper discusses whether the reader is as important as the writer in the sphere of literary meaning. By looking at the writer as a reader within a literary culture, the paper suggests that we need to reconsider the role of the writer and her relationship with a community of historical readers.