

A Study on the Structure of Feeling in Charlotte Bronte's *The Professor*

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doi:10.56397/JRSSH.2024.04.09

Abstract

Raymond Williams (1921-1988), one of the most influential Marxist cultural critics in the 20th century, proposed the concept of "structures of feeling" to reproduce the social psychology and emotional experience of people from an era. The structures of feeling are most conspicuous during social transformation and implicit in literary works of the same period. This paper intends to examine Charlotte Bronte's novel *The Professor* with Raymond Williams' "structures of feeling" theory to find out the conflict and contradiction between the real feelings of the characters in the novel and the dominant cultural characteristics, as well as the author's solution strategy — the magic formula, and to uncover the participation of literary works in British empire construction.

Keywords: Raymond Williams, structures of feeling, *The Professor*, Charlotte Bronte

1. Introduction

"Structure of feelings", a term invented by British Marxist cultural theorist Raymond Williams, was originally "used to describe the general feeling of people to the real life in a certain era"¹. In order to avoid a traditional grand and improper cultural research mode, Williams tried to look for an encompassing term to examine various elements and connections of the culture of a certain time in the past, so as to reproduce the mindset of the people faced with social conflicts and contradictions at that time. Since it was proposed in 1954 in *A Preface to the Film*, the connotation of "structure of feelings" had been continuously extended with the

in-depth cultural study of Williams in the following three decades. In *Culture and Society* (1958), Williams applied "structure of feelings" to analyze British industrial novels in the 19th century, discussing the shared emotions and orientations of the characters, and pointing out the conflict between the prevailing values of the time and the author's real-life experience. In 1961, Williams published *The Long Revolution*, which made a comprehensive analysis of the British society in the 1840s and summed up seven major social events, sorting out the communal values of popular novels at that time. It was in this book that Williams put forward the concept of social characteristics. Williams believes that structure of feelings is consistent with social characteristics, but "social characteristics are idealized values, while structure of feeling is the real perception of

¹ Zhao Yifan, Zhang Zhongzai. (2017). *Key Words of Western Literary Theory*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 433.

reality”¹. Personal experience is bound to conflict with some social characteristics, but more often than not the novelists would use a magic plan to cover up the contradiction. After the 1970s, Williams absorbed the anti-hegemony thought of Gramsci (the Italian thinker) and went on to disclose the hegemonic nature of capitalist culture.

Charlotte Bronte is one of the most famous English writers in the 19th century. She published four novels in total — *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shelly* (1849), *Villette* (1853) and *The Professor* (1857), among which *Jane Eyre* attracts most attention of the critics, but her debut novel is *The Professor*, which tells the story of William Crimsworth, an orphan who struggled to be successful and his romantic story with the Anglo-Swiss hybrid embroider — Francis. Living in the vortex of Britain’s industrial revolution in the 19th century, as a middle-class intellectual woman and a writer with keen insight, Charlotte’s works were inevitably imprinted with signs of change and crisis.

This paper will study *The Professor* with the “structure of feelings” concept of Raymond Williams to sort out the scattered social characteristics in the novel, grasping the general psychological and social state of the people in that era, and examine the conflict and contradiction between the writer’s real feelings and the dominant social values, as well as the author’s solution — the magic plan, and then analyze the empire construction and the essence of the cultural hegemony of the bourgeoisie that literary works participate in. This study has certain value in that it is based on the sociocultural criticism theory of “structure of feelings”, which will enrich the study of Charlotte Bronte and her novels.

2. The Time and Major Social Features of Charlotte Bronte Literary Creation

Charlotte Bronte was born in 1816 and wrote her novels between 1846 and 1855. The early Victorian period of Britain has undergone earth-shaking changes, including the Industrial Revolution, parliamentary reform, the Charter movement, the promulgation of the Poor Law (*Amendment*), overseas colonization, and etc. After the Industrial Revolution from 1780s to 1830s, British economy developed rapidly. By the middle of the 19th century, the Industrial revolution was nearly completed, and mass

production by machine basically replaced manual production and became the “workshop of the world”². With the rapid development of the economic power of the bourgeoisie, Britain began the parliamentary reform in 1832. “The center of the national system shifted to the middle class, the Whig Party took the reins of power, and the government was covered with a liberal veil”³. The emerging industrial bourgeoisie won more parliamentary seats, and the traditional land aristocracy was forced to cede some rights. The parliamentary reforms brought about the change of the economic system, the shift from identity discrimination to property discrimination, and the beginning of the alliance between the aristocracy and the new middle class. Parliamentary reforms benefited the industrial bourgeoisie, but the working class got nothing and continued to suffer. The incomplete parliamentary reform and the implementation of the Poor Laws in 1834 led directly to the Workers’ Charter Movement of 1836-1848. The great social change had a great impact on people’s life and thoughts. These new thoughts collided with traditions and customs and resulted in unique social features.

In *The Long Revolution*, Williams outlined the main social characteristics of the 1840s — people believed that work was valuable; One’s position in society is increasingly determined by one’s actual position rather than one’s birth; The poor man is poor because of his own defects; The best of the poor climb out of the mire; Suffering is noble in a sense, because it teaches humility and courage and leads to the effort of doing one’s duty; Simplicity, temperance, and piety are the principal virtues, and the family is its central institution; It is also a duty to help the weak, but only if this help does not promote the weakness of the person.⁴ These social ethics embodied the values dominated by the rising middle class, but there were also declining aristocratic class and emerging working class values during this period, thus the social psychology and feeling of the people at that time could not be monolithic. The dominant social characteristics were in constant conflict with the social life and personal

¹ Ibid.435.

² Qian Chengdan, Xu Jieming. (2002). *British General History*. Shanghai: Shanghai Social Sciences Press, 221.

³ G.L. Stretch. (1997). *The Biography of Queen Victoria*. Translated by Xue Shiqi. Shanghai: Oriental Publishing Center, 23.

⁴ Raymond Williams, (2019). *The Long Revolution* Translated by Ni Wei. Shanghai: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 71.

experience at that time, which resulted in the contradictory structure of feeling. What Williams finds most fascinating about “structures of feeling” is that they exist in almost all fiction and popular works that pass for literature. “Charlotte Bronte and Anne Bronte’s novels are actually like many novels in terms of plot and structures of feeling”¹. As an intellectual woman of the middle and lower bourgeoisie, Charlotte has a keen insight into the world. Her novels seem to have no direct relationship with major social issues, but the behavior and thoughts of the characters in her novels also reflect the popular values of the time. In *The Professor*, we can not only find the correspondence between ideas of characters and their living age, but also see the embodiment of the mainstream structure of feeling in the works, that is, the conflict between the specific experience of people at that time and the main social characteristics representing the bourgeois values, as well as the author’s own ideal and helplessness as a woman.

3. Conflict and Contradiction — the “Structures of Feelings” in *The Professor*

3.1 Personal Virtue, Enterprise and Success

Charlotte mainly focuses on the personal struggle and self-development of lower bourgeois. Her novels mainly describes the life of the middle class and aristocrats. The characters and plots are closely related to her own life. In terms of personal pursuit and value, accumulating wealth and improving social status are the eternal themes of her works.

In *The professor*, the hero William Crimsworth was a role model of bourgeois morals — well-bred, austere, temperate and pious. Complying with popular values, he has an enterprising spirit, and believe that hard-work will bring wealth and status improvement, and that the outstanding poor will eventually rise. When he graduated from Eton, he had no fortune and little prospect of any future, but he rejected his uncles’ offer of becoming a priest and a ticket of marriage to the upper class, unwilling to become dependent on others, which reflects the early Victorian spirit of self-help. While working as a clerk in his brother Edward’s factory, he suffered a lot but remained rational, without any moral laxity, and did not fall into debt even though he was exploited by

his brother. Had he remained in the factory, this lost scion of aristocratic family, despite all his virtues, could not have risen to prominence. To save him from the awkward dilemma, Charlotte made a clever arrangement. William met Hunsden, a big capitalist from an old family, and after constant hesitation, accepted his help and went abroad to make a living. With Hunsden’s letter of recommendation and an Eton education, he got a job as a teacher at a private school in Brussels. Could it be that William’s virtue and discipline had brought this opportunity? Apparently not. Without the reference from Hunsden or an elite educational background, he would have continued to live in poverty, leaving his abilities and ambitions unfulfilled. Teaching at a private school paid much more than working in Edward’s factory, but it was not enough to change William’s social status. Later, William recognized the hypocrisy of Mr. Pelet and Mlle Reuter and resigned, but for a long time could not find a job. At this time, the author once again arranged the magic formula, which allowed him to save the son of a local celebrity from drowning, and thus was recommended to become a university teacher, and his income and social status increased significantly. Soon William and his wife Frances set up a private school and, with the help of two noblemen, achieved great success, elevating themselves to a comfortable middle class life. William emphasized their diligence when they looked back upon the past years of efforts, “finally success bestowed every now and then encouraging reward on diligence”². While the efforts and success of the couple lighted hope for those struggling in poverty and stressed the values of the bourgeoisie — as long as being positive, enterprising, diligent and self-denying, they did conceal the fact that their success was largely due to the help of Mr. Hunsden — the referrer to upper-class. Actually, Charlotte was aware that hard-working did not necessarily render success. Charlotte herself had failed to run her own school because of the difficulty in recruiting students, which is likely why she included several magic schemes in *The Professor*, in which noblemen directly contributed to the couple’s success, thus covering up the awkwardness of the start-up difficulties. It also reflects the tension of the author’s personal experience and feelings with mainstream values

¹ Ibid.85

² Bronte. (2012). *The Professor*. Beijing: Chinese Translation Press, 194.

such as “outstanding people will eventually stand out”. The enterprising spirit of capitalism gives hard-work value, and the room for the lower and middle classes to rise, but in reality, the help from the noble is hard to seek and entrepreneurship may fail as well. In addition, William’s departure from the British Isles also reflected the lack of job opportunities within England.

3.2 Money or Origin?

In *The Professor*, as soon as the Crimsworth couple accumulated enough wealth by running private school, they purchased real estate in England and became proper squires, and thus noticeably improving their influence in the area. As a descendant of merchant and noble, William successfully regained his position by setting up a business and buying land. The rise of the English bourgeoisie was an important feature of the 19th century, especially during the Victorian period. In England and other Western European cities, it’s not rare to see rich businessmen investing in the countryside, either buying land, marrying nobles or becoming officials to elevate their status and expand their political power. Since ancient times, land has always been the most important material wealth in British rural society as well as the symbol that can best reflect the status of a rural resident, and is also closely related to political power. The exchange of money for land could be considered as a make-up for one’s defect in origin. Money and origin are both significant resources and could be taken advantage of to achieve certain purposes. But which one is more important? Money or birth? It’s hard to rush to a conclusion. Judging from Crimsworth brothers’ accomplishments, we can see that money is a critical standard for social status, which is consistent with the popular belief in the 1840s that “a person’s social status was determined by money, not by family affiliation”¹. In fact, the author arranged for William to marry the poor but talented embroiderer in order to diminish the decisive role of birth, thus indicating the importance of money to social status. However, due to the influence of the residual aristocratic culture, birth and family still have a certain importance, which is valued by big industrial capitalists. It must be noted that William and his brother are superior to many people in birth,

because their mother was from a prominent noble clan. Their aristocrat uncle provided William Eton education, which enabled him to land a decent job in Brussels. Although this maybe the least William desire to admit, he was indeed privileged because of his birth. Moreover, the noble temperament William inherited from her mother was consistently emphasized and enabled him to triumph over Edward in their confrontation as well. Anyhow, wealth is a sign of social status while family birth is also an important wealth. *The Professor* is indicative of the coexistence of the Capitalist and the old aristocracy cultures.

3.3 The Balance Between the Ideal of Equality, Independence and Family Angels

After Queen Victoria married and had children, she handed over most government duties to her husband Prince Albert and launched the Pure Life campaign, which “set a model of loving family life and became a role model for women nationwide, especially for middle class women”². The concept of the nuclear family was also formed during this period. The context of “family angel” limited the social responsibilities and scope of middle-class women. Although bourgeois values encouraged hard work, middle-class women were confined to the myth of “happy housewife” at that time. Women from middle class families in the 19th century generally did not receive serious education before marriage. Some of the education they received in dance, music, body, etc. was intended to make them more attractive to men and more competitive in the marriage market. Once married, a woman became her husband’s private property and lived off his snort. If the dowry was large, then there was security after marriage. With no rich dowry, women in the family were reduced to senior servants who lived to please their husbands. And those poor ladies at marriageable age who could not get married had to go out to work. Working women are seen as insults to their families and their career paths are narrow. In order not to degrade their status, they would not work in factories. “The only socially acceptable jobs they could take were tailoring and governesses”³. Charlotte knew this very well — she had been a governess

¹ Zhao Yifan, Zhang Zhongzai. (2017). *Key Words of Western Literary Theory*. Shanghai: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 434.

² Jane O’Neill. (2004). *The World of the Bronte Sisters — Their Life, Times and Works*. Translated by Ye Wanhua. Haikou: Hainan Publishing House, Sanhuan Publishing House, 211.

³ Ibid.204.

in two families, and had suffered huge humiliation. In real life, it was difficult to realize the feminist ideal of independence and equality pursued by Charlotte.

Terry Eagleton argues that “Charlotte’s protagonist longs for independence, but also for domination; Accompanied by the desire to dominate is the urge to submit to a greater will.”¹ In *The Professor*, William describes his wife Frances as “a curious mixture of tractability and firmness.”² “Master”, as Francis calls her husband William after marriage, reflects her humble and submissive attitude. The word “master” can be understood as either a teacher or a master, implying her subordinate position in the family. She would find a way to keep her husband warm when he comes home at six every night. “My home was my heaven. The lady directress vanished from before my eyes, and Frances Henri, my own little lace-mender, was magically restored to my arms.”³ Francis was lively and cheerful in her husband’s presence, talking with him and reading poetry to him, showing great deference and respect to him. The ambitious directress turned into a meek middle-class housewife, reproducing the image of “angel of family angel”. However, it is not difficult to notice Frances’ pursuit of equality and independence under the mask of feminine appearance. Unwilling to live a life dependent on her husband like other women, she insisted on working after marriage despite William’s opposition. Aware of the income gap between herself and her husband, Frances started a boarding school at home. The school turned out to be a huge success which produced a great deal of wealth, which consequently contributed to William’s return to England in prosperity, and Francis also obtained an equal family status. The arrangement, in which they supported each other and walked side by side like a modern couple, actually challenged the unequal gender status quo of that time. However, Frances’ obedience and accurate implement of the role of wife and mother make her ideal of equality and independence seem less aggressive. Obedience and female glamour give her more rights. The author seems to have found a solution to the contradiction between the ideal and the reality.

This plan is very clever — running a school at home can avoid the embarrassment of working out. A woman maintaining the popular concept of good wife and mother while preserving economic independence may be the ideal of the Bronte sisters. The Bronte children grew up reading romantic novels and poems⁴. Charlotte was full of fantasies about love, and as an evangelical Protestant she longed for the warmth of marriage and family. However, she also pursued gender equality and personal independence, believing that whoever holds the purse can be the master of the family. In a letter to Ellen Nassy, she wrote that a wife should not be an appendage to her husband, “I do not want you to marry a very rich husband and be seen by any man as a sweet charity object”⁵. It can be said that Charlotte Bronte represents new woman. In *The Professor*, she affirms the importance of women’s career. A woman’s value and personal achievement should not be confined to family and children. Only by living on their own can women enjoy independent economic and social status and independent personality in the family. Compared with Jane Eyre, *The Professor* is more bold in its expression of feminist thought, which may suggest why it could not be accepted by publishers at first.

4. Magic Schemes and Empire Building

Most of Charlotte Bronte’s protagonists are middle-class who have lost property due to family changes. They are self-cultivated, learned, able, diligent and have a strong enterprising spirit. They all regain their respected social status due to the success of entrepreneurship or love and marriage. However, the road to success is not smooth sailing. Personal ideals and reality are often in conflicts. Whenever the hero meets difficulties, the author always arranges a magic plan to make him turn around and get new opportunities. In *The Professor*, William was squeezed by his own brother and in desperation he fled the British Isles to get a career breakthrough, which consequently brought him success. The magic scheme of sending its hero overseas to look for fortune is not unique in Charlotte’s novel. In fact, it is typical in works of that time, as we can find also in Dickens’ novels.

¹ Terry Eagleton. (2017). *Bronte Sisters: The Myth of Power*. Translated by Gao Xiaoling. Beijing: CITIC Press, 48.

² Bronte. (2012). *The Professor*. Beijing: Chinese Translation Press, 192.

³ Ibid.196.

⁴ Jane O’Neill. (2004). *The World of the Bronte Sisters: Their Lives, Times and Works*. Haikou: Hainan Publishing House, Sanhuan Publishing House, 70.

⁵ Bronte Charlotte. (1995). *The Letters of Charlotte Bronte*. Translated by Yang Jingyuan. Shanghai: Sanlian Bookstore, 90.

In *Great Expectation*, Magwitch, a fugitive Pip had saved, became rich, and anonymously sponsored Pip so that Pip could have a chance to receive a superior education. It was in Australia, where convicts were sent into exile, that Magwitch made his fortune.

British historian John Darwin argued that, in addition to government encouragement, "Britain's overseas empire was largely created by the enterprise of countless individuals."¹ Countless merchants, investors, immigrants and missionaries cooperated with each other to construct various forms of colonization, which secured a large amount of wealth for Britain, and also helped alleviate social problems such as unemployment and poverty in the process of industrial revolution. At its peak, a quarter of the world was under British control. The large-scale overseas expansion of Britain in the 19th century also shaped the feeling structure of Britain. Overseas became a place of hope and achieved the interests of numerous individuals. Subconscious imperial colonization and racism are also reflected in literature, and Williams was keenly aware of the relationship between the structure of feeling in fiction and the imperial experience long before the rise of post-colonial criticism. Empire is a much wider circuitous route — any weak person can be turned to this path to create a new life.

Both the beautiful imagination of colonial wealth and opportunities and the narration of other colonial "barbarians" in literature consciously or unconsciously promoted the construction of the British Empire. As we find in *The Professor*, Charlotte's description of the youth of Brabant, "Their intellectual faculties were generally weak, their animal propensities strong; thus there was at once an importance and a kind of inert force in their natures."² When speaking of Mr. Pelet's mother, Charlotte criticized her appearance "ugly, as only Continental old women can be" and her style of dressing "made her look uglier than she really was"³. The Continental women are mentally depraved and ugly, not any different than barbarians. Charlotte has become one of the massive troop of disseminators of British imperial culture, which caters to the capitalist expansionist mood

of that time.

However, as a sensitive writer, Charlotte did notice some problems with the industrial expansion of capitalist Britain, which was why she arranged Mr. Hunsden to disclose the wretchedness and vice in England. "Examine the footprints of our august aristocracy, see how they walk in blood; put your head in the English cottage doors; get a glimpse of Famine crouched torpid on black hearthstones, of Disease lying bare on beds without coverlets..."⁴ But at the same time Charlotte arranged the Anglo-Swiss girl Frances to defend England by saying "I was thinking about the good side — what elevated in your character as a nation; the efforts of industry, the achievement of enterprise, or the discoveries of science"⁵. We can see the hesitation and question when she was swept up in patriotism and imperialist experience.

5. Conclusion

In the 19th century, Britain was undergoing a social transformation. Various cultures and values impacted people's psychology and formed a unique structure of feeling. Charlotte Brontë's protagonists are "ambitious and frustrated, isolated and intelligent and self-reliant"⁶. Her novel exhibits the social characteristics of the time — diligent and self-denied. However, we can find her being torn apart by both the Protestant capitalist ethic and the Romanticism of the old aristocracy, the idealism and the reality — enterprising and diligence do not necessarily lead to success; The "family angel" contradicts the middle-class ideal of female independence and gender equality. The magic formula adopted by Charlotte delays the conflicts between personal feelings and prevalent social characteristics and deftly preserves bourgeois values, showing that the beliefs favorable to the bourgeoisie have been promoted to all social strata, and most people, especially the middle class, are willing to accept and maintain these ideas. Charlotte, as a petty bourgeoisie, is no exception, and her novels are essentially a form of maintaining the cultural hegemony of the bourgeoisie. However, as Williams said, "it is foolish to explain individuals with rigid class terms. Class is a collective model rather than an individual

¹ John Darwin. (2015). *The Unfinished Empire*. Translated by FENG Yu, Ren Sisi, LI Xin. Beijing: CITIC Press, 7.

² Brontë. (2012). *The Professor*. Beijing: Chinese Translation Press, 49.

³ Ibid.51.

⁴ Ibid.184.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Terry Eagleton. (2017). *Brontë Sisters: The Myth of Power*. Translated by Gao Xiaoling. Beijing: CITIC Press, 6.

model”¹. We cannot simply use class terms to judge Charlotte’s social network, because individuals have different thinking patterns and behaviors. As an insightful writer, Charlotte’s magic plan not only caters to the interests of the bourgeoisie and the British colonial expansion in the 19th century, but also depicts the awkward situation faced by middle and lower class educated females and the author’s personal tireless pursuit of equality and independence.

Fund Project

This paper is supported by the project *A study on the “Emotional Structure” of Charlotte Bronte’s novels* (The general Project of Philosophy and Social Science Research in Colleges and Universities in Jiangsu Province in 2021 commissioned by Jiangsu Provincial Department of Education and Jiangsu Social Science Funding). Project number — 2021SJA1808.

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¹ Raymond Williams. (2018). *Society and Culture: 1780-1950*. Translated by Gao Xiaoling. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 459.