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LINGUISTIQUE LITTERATURE DIDACTIQUE

UNIVERSITÉ MARIEN NGOUABI

Ecole Normale Supérieure

Langage & Enseignement

N° 002
Juillet-Décembre 2019

Sous la coordination de Edouard Ngamountsika et Alain Fernand Raoul Loussakoumounou

GRESLA-DL

Revue semestrielle des Sciences du langage et Didactique des langues
ENS-Université Marien Ngouabi

Actes des premières journées scientifiques « Langue, Littérature et enseignement au Congo »

et

VARIA

Groupe de Recherche en Sciences du Langage et Didactique des langues
ENS - UMNG

ISSN : 2664-5483

GRESLA-DL
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Etudes linguistiques, littéraires et didactiques

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Brazzaville - Congo

ISSN : 2664-5483

Marriages of Convenience in Charlotte Brontë's novels: *Jane Eyre, Shirley, Villette and The Professor*

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Résumé : *L'accession au trône d'Angleterre en 1837 par la reine Victoria a donné naissance à une période de stabilité dans le pays. L'avènement de la démocratie, l'éducation pour tous et de l'urbanisation a transformé le pays en un endroit enviable pour y vivre. Cependant, ces progrès n'étaient que la face visible de l'iceberg. La société victorienne était déviante du fait d'une idéologie de classe. Les mariages économiques par exemple, émanaient de ce système inique. Dans ses quatre œuvres romanesques Jane Eyre, Shirley, Villette et The Professor, Charlotte Brontë critique avec acrimonie les mariages économiques. Par conséquent, cet article a pour objectif d'étudier les effets socio-économiques de ces mariages par intérêt tant sur les prétendants que les conjoints.*

Mots-clés : *Société victorienne, idéologie de classes, mariages économiques, mariage par intérêt*

Abstract: *The accession of Queen Victoria to the throne of England in 1837 burst forth a period of stability in the country. The advent of*

democracy, popular education, urbanization transformed the country into a desirable place to live. However, these advancements constituted the tip of the iceberg. The Victorian society was a deviant one due to class ideology. Materially based marriage, for example, was the expression of such an iniquitous system. In her four novels, Jane Eyre, Shirley, Villette and The Professor, Charlotte Brontë acrimoniously criticizes money-driven matrimonies. Thus, this article aims to examine the socio-economic effects of such mercenary unions not only on the suitors, but also on the partners.

Keywords: *Victorian society, class ideology*, marriage of convenience, mercenary unions

Introduction

Naturally contracted between a man and a woman, marriage is a legally and socially certified union, structured by laws, rules, customs, beliefs and attitudes (which advocate the rights and duties of the partners and accords status of the partners to their progeny, should there exist any). Various factors may lead partners to get married: sexual gratification and regulation, division of labour between sexes, satisfaction of personal needs for affection, procreation and most importantly, the lure of gain. To better comprehend its implications, let us delve into one major period of England's literary history: Victorianism.

Although the popular Victorian fiction presumed that marriage was the absolute goal and the happiest condition in life, some writers bitterly criticized its perverted form: marriage of convenience.William Thackeray's *The Newcomes* (1853-55) censured it through Madame de Florac, one of the characters. She says:

> […] we sell or buy beauty, or rank, or wealth; we inaugurate the bargain in churches with sacramental services, in which the parties engaged call upon Heaven to witness their vows-we know them to be lies, and seal them with God's name (as cited in Reed, 1985, p. 110).

These poignant words accurately summarize the mercantile and hypocrite characteristics of Victorian matrimonies, which Victorian citizens used to settle for interested motives. Class ideology surrogated love in the efficacy of the union between a man and a woman,

shaking the foundations of that social reference.

Another fervent critic of commercial marriages was Thackeray's admirer, Charlotte Brontë. From her first to her final novel *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1849), *Villette*(1853)and *The Professor* (1857-posthumous publication), the authoress cautiously took her time to elaborate this topic of utmost prominence. Thus, it is obvious to everyone that this article raises a fundamental question: How does Charlotte Brontë treat Victorian marriage in her novels? We can draw two assumptions from the above interrogation. Firstly, Charlotte Brontë strongly denounces commercial marriages because they are loveless. Secondly, she advocates sincere engagements between loving partners.

Preliminary thoughts on the topic can be traced back, at first, to Kate Washington's article (1997-1998) entitled "Rochester's Mistresses: Marriage, Sex, Economic Exchange in *Jane Eyre*. Here, the writer explores the complex intersection of money, sexuality, economics, and power by comparing marriage to a form of prostitution. Furthermore, Albashir Mohammed Al-Haj's seminal works "The Depiction of True and Pure Love in Charlotte Bronte *[Sic] Jane Eyre*" (2015) and "The Idea of Women in Charlotte Bronte's *Shirley*" (2016), respectively showhow true and pure love overcome the barriers of class consideration (enduring through hopelessness and pain), and present the Victorian society's conception of women and their unhappy marriages.

Substantially, whereas the previous reflections focus on either *Jane Eyre* or *Shirley*, ours undertakes to tackle Charlotte Brontë's four novels. Such approach will certainly enable the reader to make a global assessment of money-driven marriages according to the authoress. In view of the preceeding, our contribution lies in that marriages of convenience derive from the social class system. Thus, they are insincere and loveless. We wish to reach the conclusion that marrying someone is not a matter of how much money they possess. The selected approach for the scope of this study is the sociological one.

Our cogitation is structured around four sections, divided into sub-sections. The first unit interrogates Bertha Mason's marriage with Edward Rochester in *Jane Eyre.* The second deciphers male characters' promotion of marriage of convenience in *Shirley*. The third describes the marriage market in *Villette*. The last exposes the

Crimsworth brothers' (Edward and William) interest based marriage episodes in *The Professor*.

1. Rochester's mercantile marriage with Bertha

Rochester's mercantile marriage with Bertha is one of the important issues of this study. To carry out this analysis, this section is divided into two sub-sections.

1.1-Rochester's ignorance of his in-laws' past before marrying

Bertha Rochester-mostly known through her maiden name Bertha Mason is the victim of an interest-based marriage as she marries Rochester in strange conditions. Coming from Jamaica, Bertha is presented as a lunatic in the novel. One of the evidences showing that her marriage with Rochester was built on weak foundations is Rochester's superficial knowledge of his in-laws' past. For example, it is only after their honeymoon that he discovers the mad lineage of his wife's family. Rochester tells Jane:

> My bride's mother I had never seen: I understood she was dead. The honeymoon over, I learned my mistake; she was only mad, and shut up in a lunatic asylum. There was a younger brother, too--a complete dumb idiot. The elder one, whom you have seen (and whom I cannot hate, whilst I abhor all his kindred, because he has some grains of affection in his feeble mind, shown in the continued interest he takes in his wretched sister, and also in a dog-like attachment he once bore me), will probably be in the same state one day. (Brontë, Jane Eyre,2015, p. 266)

As mentioned above, Rochester's wife and in-laws were a mystery to him. His sentences prove that he did not really know them nor their past.

1.2-Marriage arranged by father and brother

The true reason for Rochester's ignorance of his wife's past can be located in the respective roles of the pair's fathers. Bertha's father undoubtedly wanted to satisfy a business partner. Rochester's father for one desired to ensure wealth to his son. In this logic, Adrienne Rich(1966-1978/1990) suggests that Rochester's marriage with Bertha was *"arranged for financial reasons by his father"* (p. 150). As his father's second son, Rochester is disadvantaged in the hereditary

succession. His father's possessions are already preordained for his elder brother, Rowland.

The only way for Rochester to secure his heritage is to marry Bertha, "*the heiress to a West Indian fortune […] a woman whom the younger son of an aristocratic British family would consider marrying"*(Meyer, 1996/2007, p. 48). Therefore, his studies finished, Rochester's father and his brother settle a profitable match for him. Rochester provides shocking details of the transaction to Jane. He confesses:

> Well, Jane, being so, it was his resolution to keep the property together; he could not bear the idea of dividing his estate and leaving me a fair portion: all, he resolved, should go to my brother, Rowland. Yet as little could he endure that a son of his should be a poor man. I must be provided for by a wealthy marriage. He sought me a partner betimes. Mr. Mason, a West India planter and merchant, was his old acquaintance. He was certain his possessions were real and vast: he made inquiries. Mr. Mason, he found, had a son and daughter; and he learned from him that he could and would give the latter a fortune of thirty thousand pounds: that sufficed. When I left college, I was sent out to Jamaica, to espouse a bride already courted for me. (Jane Eyre, p. 227)

Deceptively, thirty thousand pounds were enough to engage Rochester in a perilous future. The corollary of his gest with Bertha is that he owns her wealth, as stipulated in the 1857 Marriage and Divorce Act:

> […] at common law the wives personal chattels vested absolutely in her husband on marriage and any personalty which she acquired during marriage (such as money earned or bequeathed to her) followed the same course. (Burn, as cited in Reed, p. 106).

Rochester's marriage with Bertha turns into bitter deception because the normal procedure had not been employed. He did not make her a formal marriage proposal, nor did she even have the opportunity to give her consent. His father had already courted Bertha for him. The result of such hare-brained scheme was unhappy marriage. Rochester tells Jane:

> These were vile discoveries; but except for the treachery of concealment, I should have made them no subject of reproach to my wife, even when I found her nature wholly alien to mine, her tastes obnoxious to me, her cast of mind common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher, expanded to anything larger--when I found that I could not pass a single evening, nor even a single hour of the day with her in comfort; that kindly conversation could not be sustained between us […] when I perceived that I should never have a quiet or settled household, because no servant would bear the continued outbreaks of her violent and unreasonable temper, or the vexations of her absurd, contradictory, exacting orders--even then I restrained myself: I eschewed upbraiding, I curtailed remonstrance; I tried to devour my repentance and disgust in secret; I repressed the deep antipathy I felt. (Jane Eyre, p. 228)

Even though Rochester's *"Mariage de Convenance"* (Reed, 1975, p. 112) enabled him to possess Bertha's wealth, it transpires that it was nightmarish, burdensome, leading to his hideous physical state at the end of *Jane Eyre.* Lamonica (2003) describes Bertha's burning of Thornfield as the destruction of the patriarchal house. She holds: *"Bertha achieves her ultimate rebellion-administering her own poetic justice-in her suicidal destruction of the patriarchal house, the symbol of the family practices of primogeniture and marital transaction, in which she has been imprisoned"* (p. 84). Rochester's misfortune could be analysed as God's punishment for his violation of a sacred vows that is, that of being faithful to his wife. More to the point, his overt infidelity (Adele's presence in his bridal home) and his attempt to bigamy with Jane, condone him. His physical diminution represents the price he must pay to be reunited to Jane.

This state of affairs leads a loveless matrimony which shamelessly finds promoters.

2. Mr. Yorke and Mr. Sympson as the promoters of loveless matrimonies

As any business, loveless matrimonies need promoters to put people in contact in order to be efficient. In this regard, this section is divided into two sub-sections.

2.1. Mr. Yorke entices Robert Moore to contract a loveless matrimony

Charlotte Brontë returns commercial marriages in *Shirley.* Threatened by bankruptcy, Robert Moore resorts to money-driven matrimony. Gilbert and Gubar (2000) depict that fact in the lines below:

> Throughout the novel, Moore waits, hoping to alter his waning fortunes but unable to take any real initiative. Finally, he is reduced to the morally reprehensible and pitifully ineffective decision not to marry Caroline Helstone because she is poor, and instead to propose to Shirley Keeldar because she is rich." (p. 375).

Such absurd idea is encouraged by an ill-advised counsellor, Mr. Yorke. In effect, while Moore is bemoaning his lamentable business conditions, Mr. Yorke subtly suggests him a viable alternative to address the problem. This, he assures, is something not worth talking about if the suitor is *"a romantic"* or *"in love"* (Brontë, *Shirley,*2012,p. 169). To Moore's aversion of marriage, Mr. Yorke replies: *"Well, then: if you are sound both in heart and head, there is no reason why you should not profit by a good chance if it offers: therefore, wait and see"* (*Shirley,* p. 169). If he is so certain of his words, it is because Mr. Yorke's marriage was consummated in analogous loveless circumstances.

Curate Peter Malone joins Mr. Yorke in his view of marriage when he states:

> If there is one notion I hate more than another, it is that of marriage--I mean marriage in the vulgar weak sense, as a mere matter of sentiment--two beggarly fools agreeing to unite their indigence by some fantastic tie of feeling. Humbug! But an advantageous connection, such as can be formed in consonance with dignity of views and permanency of solid interests, is not so bad--eh? (Shirley, p. 21).

This occurrence inexorably urges Arnold Shapiro (1968/1990) to sustain: *"All men in the novel, no matter their political views, agree with the view of marriage expressed by Peter Malone"* (p. 225). Normally, the prerequisite to marriage should be sheer love between partners. With Malone however, it is a matter of interest.

Mr. Yorke's role does not limit to proposing money nuptial. He also plays the matchmaker. To make the marriage between Moore and Shirley happen, he undertakes to convince the latter, having recourse to blood lineage: *"My lass, Moore is a gentleman: his blood is pure and ancient as mine or thine"*(*Shirley,* p. 376).The old man pursues his commercial endeavour despite Shirley's indifference to social pedigree reference. In a conversation with Louis Moore (Moore's younger brother), Mr. Yorke expresses his total inability to understand Moore's negligence of the financial affair. Moore's prolonged stay in London disturbs him in the highest point. He states:

> Yond' brother Robert of yours seems to me to be either a fool or a madman. Two months ago I could have sworn he had the game all in his own hands; and there he runs the country, and quarters himself up in London for weeks together, and by the time he comes back he'll find himself checkmated. Louis, 'there is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune, but, once let slip, never returns again.' I'd write to Robert, if I were you, and remind him of that. (Shirley, p. 480).

Mr. Yorke is worried that Shirley weds another person in Moore's absence. He exhorts Louis to haste Moore's return so that he could win Shirley back. Mr. Yorke's cynical manipulation proves efficacious as Moore resolves to make his insincere proposal to Shirley. He tells Mr. Yorke: *"I sternly offered myself-my fine person-with my debts, of course, as a settlement"* (*Shirley*, p. 538). Not surprisingly, Shirley's rejection is unequivocal. She cannot marry Moore not only,because he views marriage as a financial necessity, but also because they do not love each other. She respects, admires, likes Moore as her brother and that is it.

This shows that love for the sake of it still exists because of the notion of preferential suitor.

2.2. Mr. Sympson's preferential suitors for Shirley

Mercantile marriage bears another form in *Shirley* through Mr. Sympson, the heroine's patrician uncle. He has come to Yorkshire for a specific goal: *"he anxiously desired to have his niece married; to make her a suitable match, give her in charge to a proper husband, and wash his hands of her for ever"* (*Shirley*, p. 473). The first suitor,

Samuel Fawthrop Wynne, is according to Mr. Sympson, *"A fine unencumbered estate; real substance; good connexions"* (*Shirley*, p. 473). Consequently, the transaction *"must be done"*(*Shirley,* p. 473).

Obviously, Shirley's answer is in the negative. Her uncle justifies his choice by calling on the Victorian custom: *"He has twice your money, - twice your common sense; - equal connexions, equal respectability"* (*Shirley*, p. 474). Succeeding suitors show themselves but Shirley rebuffs them, except for the Baronet Sir Philip Nunnely, with whom Shirley shares common fields of interests such as poetry and music. Later on, he makes Shirley a wedding proposal but she also rejects it. If Shirley is so reluctant, it is because marrying a man she does not love and going through the church ceremony with him is *"the blackest of all lies"* (Tennyson, as cited in Reed, p. 109), a piece of trickery that people legalize in the Church, without fearing God. Instead of exchanging solemn vows, the couple lie, sinning deliberately on the altar for unconfessed financial motives. Most importantly, Shirley rejects her uncles' proposals because *"neither [of the suitors] could be a 'proper' and 'suitable' match for her with spiritual, intellectual and emotional affinity."* (Singh, 1987, p. 165). Louis Moore is the perfect match for her as he meets the preceding requirements.

3. Money Marriages as reflected in *Villette*

These arranged money marriages have also got their upside down effects as expressed in the three following sub-sections.

3.1. Criticism of transgenerational marriages

Upon travelling for Brussels in the Vivid (the ship), Lucy criticizes money-driven marriage through a passenger, the eldest of the Watson brothers. He has married an extremely young woman who might be his daughter, had he ever had one. The narrator informs:

> […] the oldest, plainest, greasiest, broadest, I soon found was the husband—the bride- groom I suppose, for she was very young—of the beautiful girl. Deep was my amazement at this discovery; and deeper still when I perceived that, instead of being desperately wretched in such a union, she was gay even to giddiness. "Her laughter," I reflected, "must be the mere frenzy of despair."(Brontë, Villette, 2016, p. 58)

Here, Charlotte bitterly denounces trans-generational marriage. Lucy's amazement is meaningful in the sense that it questions the Victorian marital system. Young women like the aforementioned one are eager to sacrifice their lives and marry an old person unless their insincere action gets them out from poverty.

Brenda R. Silver believes that young women who venture in such trans-generational matrimonies desire *"the protection that such a union would offer [them]"*(Silver,1983/1990, p. 292). Gubar (1976/1990) however, compares the constriction of women's possibilities in society to the lower-class workers'. She says: *"It is the narrowness of woman's lot that makes her scheme in the marriage market where she is much a commodity as the workers in the mercantile market"* (p. 244). In so doing, those young women become fortune hunters and this form of imprisonment, for sure, ends unhappily.

3.2. Lucy's gloomy fate in the marriage market

Plebeian women can venture in money-driven marriage when they are beautiful. That physical advantage enables them to trespass the barriers of class requirements. Lucy for her part faces an opposite situation. She is indigent and plain. Silver adroitly depicts Lucy's state. She utters:

> Denied the wealth, position, or beauty that would make her a desirable object of possession, [Lucy] will be unable to overcome the inequality inherent in the relationship between supposedly passive women and successful young men such as Graham (p. 292)

Accordingly, Lucy cannot be a suitable match and may end up as a spinster. It is because of the requirements imposed by materially based matrimonies on women that Lucy resolves to conceal her feelings for Dr. John. Because she is not from the same caste as the doctor's, the latter does not pay attention to her. Likewise, Paulina and Dr. John's wedding is possible because they are from the same class.

Lucy's predicament echoes Mr. Paul's aborted nuptial twenty years ago with his beloved fiancée Justine Marie, who entered a convent and finally died as result of that impossibility. His father's critical financial condition (debts) and death prevented Mr. Paul from becoming her husband. That is undoubtedly why he disapproves of his ward Justine

Marie's (his late fiancé's namesake) commercial bridal:

> In the course of the walk I was told how Justine Marie Sauveur had always been regarded with the affection proper to a daughter—how, with M. Paul's consent, she had been affianced for months to one Heinrich Mühler, a wealthy young German merchant, and was to be married in the course of a year. Some of M. Emanuel's relations and connections would, indeed, it seems, have liked him to marry her, with a view to securing her fortune in the family; but to himself the scheme was repugnant, and the idea totally inadmissible. (Villette, pp. 541-2)

Mr. Paul is against such practices because he thinks that marrying someone is not a matter of their wealth and social position.

3.3. Ginevra marries to become a Comtess

Comte De Hammal's elopement with Ginevra Fanshawe is highly significant. Wooed at the same time by both Dr. John and Comte De Hamal, it appears that the young woman has chosen the Comte, and given that their marriage cannot receive approval because Ginevra is still a "*mineur"* (*Villette,* p. 524), they decide to escape from the town of Villette. On the next day, Ginevra's absence in the school is noticed. The narrator states:

> When matins came to be said, there was a place vacant in the first rank of boarders. When breakfast was served, there remained a coffee-cup unclaimed. When the housemaid made the beds, she found in one, a bolster laid lengthwise […] High and low was Miss Fanshawe sought; through length and breadth was the house ransacked; vainly; not a trace, not an indication, not so much as a scrap of a billet rewarded the search; the nymph was vanished, engulfed in the past night, like a shooting star swallowed up by darkness. (Villette, pp. 521-2)

In a letter to Lucy for whom she has developed affection, Ginevra recounts their elopement. It seems that jealousy has motivated her decision. She cannot bear Dr. John's relation with her cousin Paulina. The doctor loved Ginevra but she rejected him. However, she does not want him to be with another woman, especially not Paulina. Her disgust of their union is proved by the insulting names she gives them-*"minx"*for Paulina and *"bear"*for Dr. John- (*Villette*, p. 524).

The other motivation for Ginevra's wedding with Comte De Hamal has to do with social class status. Ginevra is an ambitious girl, and espousing De Hamal will secure her a prestigious title. This title's acquisition is her true reward in her marriage with the Comte. She states:

> P.S. — Remember, I am a countess now. Papa, mamma, and the girls at home, will be delighted to hear that. 'My daughter the Countess!' 'My sister the Countess!' Bravo! Sounds rather better than Mrs. John Bretton, hein? (Villette, p. 525)

Ostensibly, Ginevra has been envying her cousin's high position in the social arena. That is why she draws such a comparison in terms of appellation. Therefore, she has married the Count not only to please her destitute parents, but also to have a higher status than Paulina's. Markedly, Comte de Hamal's awful fate (gambling addiction) is certainly a punishment to their elopement.

4. Brontë's allusion to money marriages in *The Professor*

This last section is an evidence that money marriage theme covers all Brontë's works. The strength of this point of view is carried out through two sub-sections.

4.1. Propositions of financial unions to William Crimsworth

William Crimsworth, the protagonist, happens to face marriage pressure in *The Professor*. Having no fortune,his uncles, Lord Tynedale and the Hon. John Seacombe offer him two orthodox options to have an honourable position. The text reads:

> "First, after leaving Eton, I had an interview with my maternal uncles, Lord Tynedale and the Hon. John Seacombe. They asked me if I would enter the Church, and my uncle the nobleman offered me the living of Seacombe, which is in his gift, if I would; then my other uncle, Mr. Seacombe, hinted that when I became rector of Seacombe-cum-Scaife, I might perhaps be allowed to take, as mistress of my house and head of my parish, one of my six cousins, his daughters, all of whom I greatly dislike. (Brontë, The Professor, 2016, p. 6)

If the Seacombes insistently try to coerce their nephew into marriage, it is because they perceive his current social position as worry-

ing. It brings shame upon their family's reputation. Their kinship with their nephew stagnates because the latter is poor. For it to grow mature, Crimsworth must enter into the class arena. His approbation of their lucrative proposal will consolidate their family tie. Crimsworth rejects his uncles' proposals because he knows the ensuing consequences of acceptance. He *"should be a bad husband, under such circumstances, as well as a bad clergyman"*(*The Professor*, p.6). His refusal signifies that he has broken off his family relation with his patrician uncles. He thus becomes a pariah.

Full with resentment, Crimsworth confesses to his friend Hunsden: *"They have disowned me…they are people with whom I could ever had any sympathy"* (*The Professor*, p. 46). Gilbert and Gubarunderline the two uncles' bestiality when they say: *"These ungentle gentlemen, we learn, repudiated both their sister (for not marrying the wrong man) and her son William (for not marrying the right woman)"*(p. 318). Likewise, conscious of William Crimsworth's helplessness, Mr. Hunsden tells him how he can get along in the Victorian society:

> You'll make nothing by trade," continued he; "nothing more than the crust of dry bread and the draught of fair water on which you now live; your only chance of getting a competency lies in marrying a rich widow, or running away with an heiress." (The Professor, p. 34)

Only through a hypocrite marriage can William Crimsworth get out from the Victorian trap. Many Victorian men used to have recourse to the above practices because they had no choice than looking for a role in the British society at that time. Doing otherwise was exposing oneself to pauperization. Of course, scrupulous as he is, Crimsworth also rejects his friend's proposal and goes into self-exile, mainly in Belgium where he becomes a teacher of English.

4.2. Edward Crimsworth's materially based marriage

Another financial marriage is that of Crimsworth's eldest brother, Edward Crimsworth, with his wealthy and doll-like wife. A mill-owner, Edward marries a woman from the same status as his. The text reads: *"Edward-my only brother…married to a rich mill-owner's daughter"* (*The Professor*, p. 7).Nevertheless, their marriage proves to be insincere because when he goes bankrupt, his wife leaves Crimsworth Hall,

their marital domicile. His violence against her may have encouraged her departure to her parents', but she knows his comportment well. She does leave because Edward is financially bankrupt. Given that marriage is settled for life (for better and for worse; for richer or for poorer; in sickness and in health…), she should have remained with him, no matter what his demeanour. The strangest thing of all is that she goes back to her husband only when he regains his position in the class nomenclature. Hunsden tells Crimsworth: *"in six weeks [he] set up again [and]coaxed back his wife"*(*The Professor*, p. 190). Overwhelmingly, one may go as far as saying that Edward's wife prefers to be mistreated by a rich husband, but not a by a poor one.

Conclusion

To conclude, let us say that Charlotte Brontë abhors marriages of convenience because they are arranged, forced, calculated, insincere, loveless and unhappy. They have a double standard: they promote conservatismwhen they are the result of same class initiative or encourage opportunism when they are the fruit of fortune hunting.The authoress attaches great value to the topic because she thinks that *"love is certainly the most important condition and consequence for a marriage but for a successful marriage both partners must be equals in all respects [...]"* (Singh, p. 166), not a relationship *"of a purely a cash-nexuskind"* (Eagleton, 2005, p. 18).

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