

Anne Brontë and Her Friedrich-like Romantic Drawing, 'Woman gazing at a sunrise over a seascape'

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"Art may be a game, but it is a serious game." (C.D.Friedrich)

The Art of the Brontës by Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars is a collection of the Brontë sisters' illustrations that shows their aspirations as artists. From this collection I will focus on Anne Brontë's 'Woman gazing at a sunrise over a seascape' and compare her visual art with the narrative in her maiden novel, *Agnes Grey*, where her description of the scenery at the climax closely mirrors that depicted in the drawing. I will argue that the "Woman" in the visual text is the exact image of Agnes in the written text.

Further, I will compare Anne's drawing with Caspar David Friedrich's 'Woman before the Rising Sun'. Friedrich shifted his style from sepia to oil painting, making this work a turning point. It is possible to conjecture that he is depicting himself in the "Woman" as a kind of symbol of his new start. Does Anne's drawing also foretell her own fresh start in her career as a novelist?

The aim of my presentation is to illustrate the reading of Anne Brontë's visual and narrative arts as "an onion", using Roland Barthes's term, or rather, as a reading of our own imagination.

Roland Barthes likens the text of a novel to an onion. This does not signify a delving into the content of the text, but that it is in the skin of the text itself, or in the process itself, that the joy of reading lies.

. . . if hitherto we have seen the text as a fruit with its pit (an apricot, for instance), the flesh being the form and the pit the content, it would be better to see it as an onion, a superimposed construction of skins (of layers, of levels, of systems) whose volume contains, finally, no heart, no core, no secret, no irreducible principle, nothing but the very infinity of its envelopes—which envelop nothing other than the totality of its surfaces. (*The Rustle of Language* 99)

This paper is similar in approach, that is, rather than seek a conclusion, I would like to enjoy the process of reading. Barthes also says that "the pleasure of reading . . . proceeds from certain breaks (or certain collisions)" (*The Pleasure of the Text* 6). In this presentation, it will be the active participation of the audience that becomes the driving force. By inserting "breaks" into our field of vision, we can try to savor "the pleasure of Anne's visual and narrative text".

First, let's look at Anne's pencil sketch, 'Woman gazing at a sunrise over a seascape'. This drawing is in the Brontë Parsonage Museum (A6). This drawing strongly evokes Anne's literature. This is because the picture brings to mind the climactic scene in Anne's own maiden work, *Agnes Grey*.

Let's look at this scene in the novel.

There was a feeling of freshness and vigour in the very streets; and when I got free of the town, when my foot was on the sands and my face towards the broad, bright bay . . . no language can describe the effect of the deep, clear azure of the sky and ocean, the bright morning sunshine on the semi-circular barrier of craggy cliffs surmounted by green swelling hills, and on the smooth, wide sands, and the low rocks out at sea . . . looking, with their clothing of weeds and moss, like little grass-grown islands—and above all, on the brilliant, sparkling waves. And then, the unspeakable purity and freshness of the air! (64)

The protagonist, Agnes, is ultimately united in marriage with her first love, Mr. Weston, but just before her reunion with him, she stares out alone at the sun rising in the distance over the ocean at dawn. Just as she turns around, she discovers her lover behind her. Agnes's appearance probably conflates with the rear view of the woman in Anne's drawing.

This drawing does not depict scenery directly. Rather, it is through the lone woman that the viewer becomes one with her and is invited to gaze at the ocean through her eyes. The focal point of the gaze is daybreak on the sea. The morning sun is now rising from the distant horizon over the ocean as the sunrays fill the sky with a brilliant light that darts through the clouds. This seems to symbolize the protagonist's future, a future that is filled with hope.

When we juxtapose Anne's two creative artistic forms (that is, her literature and her art) with her biography, it is possible to surmise that Anne's own experience of being impressed by the ocean stimulated her artistic inspiration. Anne would accompany the Robinson family as a governess to the seaside Scarborough Spa every year. The conjecture that the ocean, which left a deep impression on her during these trips, was later manifested in her literature and art is something quite natural and appealing to her readers.

Another very interesting point is that the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich uses the same composition as does Anne. In his painting, 'Woman before the Rising Sun' (1818), it is not the ocean that the woman is gazing at, but the distant hills. Yet the sunrays emanating from the morning sun spread in all directions just as in the case of Anne's picture. The woman basks lavishly front-on in the sunlight. According to Werner Hofmann, "[her] figure is reminiscent of an icon but seen from behind; her *orate* pose is directed towards the natural phenomenon, not us. . . ." and "we continually find the same kind of uncertainty as a distinguishing characteristic in Friedrich's paintings" (108-109). And Norbert Wolf mentions as follows.

It is difficult to interpret the fervent gesture of her outstretched arms and the stylized rays radiating from the mountains on the hazy horizon, heralding the presence of the invisible

sun. . . . In the final analysis, few of Friedrich's pictures are as emphatic and almost exaggeratedly symbolic in their effect-factors which render the painting not unproblematic for the viewer. (51)

This mystical painting was a turning point in the creative period of Friedrich's artistic career from sepia to oil painting. The rear view of the woman facing the morning sun is thought to reflect Friedrich's own life. Similarly, the rear view of the woman depicted in Anne's drawing can be read as a portent of a new starting point for the author herself.

However, this artless conjecture is foiled in the face of reality. First, this drawing was done before Agnes actually saw the sea at Scarborough. Second, this is not an original work by Anne but a facsimile of some of annual books. Third the original work that Anne copied was not depicting the attainment of love but lost love. It is not a foreshadowing of the "realization of love", but rather a melancholy that evokes "tragic love". That is, here, the meaning is the opposite of the realization of love portrayed in *Agnes Grey*. It is true that if we examine the picture closely, we can see that the woman is holding in her left hand a limp handkerchief, a symbol of the tears of the owner. To the woman, the ocean is simply the infinite distance separating herself from her lover. Or perhaps it is the ruthless sea that cruelly swallows up even her ephemeral hopes.

With manifestation of this reality, the reader's consciousness is temporarily suspended. But this suspended state of consciousness creates a very interesting phenomenon. There is a kind of potentiality that exists in all creative works, and not just in literature, which invites the active participation of the audience and the formulation of meaning.

1. First, in terms of the reality that a facsimile existed:

Let's examine the simplistic but natural speculation that Anne's own experience of "looking at the sea" was sublimated into her drawing and literature. When we compare the biographical information about Anne with this sequence, we are compelled to conclude that first there was the copying of the picture (1839), then the experience of seeing the ocean (1841-1845), and finally the novel (1847), in that order.

This reality constitutes a refutation of the reader's conjectures. Or does it? It is possible that while Anne was writing *Agnes Grey*, she recalled her facsimile just as she did the sea at Scarborough that she had actually experienced.

Furthermore, the real ocean that Anne saw at Scarborough might actually have been the "sea" that had already been detached from the drawing 'Woman gazing at a sunrise over a seascape' in her poor native village of Haworth. Even that conjecture is a possibility. In other words, the actual ocean was something Anne saw before Scarborough that had taken form through her own depiction (that is, through the actual experience of the creative act). It might have been an "ocean" carved out of an awareness that already existed inside her. If you can think of it that way, then we could say that "reality caught up with art", or that "art anticipated reality".

2. Regarding the reality that the picture replicated:

The drawing considered to be the original of Anne's facsimile is, as Alexander and Sellars have pointed out, the type of landscape unique to German Romantic painters such as Friedrich, who creates a lyricism that evokes literature (406). Even if Anne's picture was a copy, Anne had the volition to *choose* such a painting. The very act of drawing (writing) necessarily projects the artist's individuality. What if she needed the medium of the painting? Doesn't that also approximate a creative work?

3. Regarding the inversion of contrasting meanings drawn by readers (attaining and losing love):

In terms of the inversion of meaning, a phenomenon occurs that is similar to the reception given to 'The Evening Star' by Friedrich. The smallness and aloneness of the youth, whose movements reverberate in the emptiness of the great sky, is given an even deeper feeling of isolation by the two figures looking on from the left-hand side of the painting. Here the strata of clouds are dyed pale purplish blue and golden yellow. A person standing in the middle of the backlight, with both arms outstretched, is facing the trailing twilight sky. In this painting, too, we see the rear view of the individual.

There is a strong influence from seventeenth-century Dutch landscape paintings in the technique. The joyous shout of the youth who discovers the first star reverberates far into the distance. Yet while there is delight, it is also undeniable that we feel a vague sense of isolation. Werner mentions "Friedrich boldly redistributed his vocabulary" (154) in 'The Evening Star'. It is possible for the viewer to even read from the same painting not joy but despair if that feeling of isolation is amplified. Here, too, there is an inversion of the initial "meaning".

In conclusion, let's return once again to Anne's actual ocean: Anne's own last ocean. For Anne, the sea played a large role in her actual life just as it did in her fiction. But if the ocean that Agnes encounters in the novel is a witness to the love attained by the protagonist and is shining radiantly with immense possibilities for the future, then the ocean that Anne sees at the end contrasts with that. It is an ocean that quietly ascertains the close to the author's life.

Anne wished Scarborough to be her final resting place. She arrived there on May 25, 1849 and died three days later. Edward Chitham notes that "a glorious sunset" (194) lay in front of Anne, who was resting alone on the beach. When we think of Anne's "ocean", the words of Carolyn Heilbrun come to mind. ". . . the woman may write her own life in advance of living it, unconscious, and without recognizing or naming the process" (*Writing a Woman's Life* 11). Perhaps Anne, too, wrote her own life in advance of living it.

What kind of ocean was it at the end of Anne's life? What were the wishes she had at her dying hour as she gazed quietly at the sea? And what type of ocean was it that flashed through her thoughts? Was it the ocean scene she had copied in 1839 at the age of nineteen? Or was it the ocean she had seen at the beginning of her twenties when she spent summer holidays from 1841 to 1845 with the Robinson family for whom she was governess? Or perhaps it was two years later, when she depicted the sea in the final two chapters of *Agnes Grey* (published in 1847) as a "sea bathed in sunrise", a sea in literature that foretold the happiness from love gained?

For Anne, the sea that is expressed in the two artistic forms of painting and literature, that is in ‘Woman gazing at a sunrise over a seascape’ and *Agnes Grey*, at times is mixed with the “reality” of biographical facts. At the same time, it cannot help but envelope the viewer or reader in many kinds of conjectures. Exactly what type of ocean do we see in the distant gaze of the woman whose back is turned toward us?

Barthes describes the quality of the text as an “onion”, but interestingly, the act of subconsciously reading meaning into the “breaks” may come to be perceived as “a superimposed construction of skin”.

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Works Cited

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