

Analyzing Character Images in Jane Eyre from the Perspective of Feminism

Jiaqi Ma

School of Literature, Journalism and Communication, Qingdao University, Qingdao, 266000, China

Keywords: Feminism, Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre, Rochester

Abstract: Charlotte Bronte is one of the greatest realist female writer in the history of 19th century English literature, as well as *Jane Eyre* is her famous representative work. Through the perspective of feminism, the article analyzes in depth the characters of Jane Eyre, Rochester, and other female characters, such as Helen Burns and Bertha Mason. The paper also vividly demonstrates the profound influence of feminism on the roles of males and females in the Victorian Era. *Jane Eyre* explores the ideas of British women's consciousness of equality, independence and their courageous pursuit of love.

1. Introduction

Jane Eyre is one of the representative works of Charlotte Bronte, a famous realist writer of the 19th century in England, and a true reflection of the author's own real life. The novel was published in 1847, the beginning of the Victorian era. Charlotte Bronte was born during that time, the early years of the Victorian era. Although the world was undergoing a period of great change, England was still calm. In Britain, people at that time had equal social status, independent ideology and equal rights for men and women. Charlotte was raised by her father, who often told her that as a woman should be self-reliant and learn to think independently. Her father's attitude had a strong impact on Charlotte. She believed that women should enjoy the same political rights and social status as men, and women needed to think, discover, and exercise their own abilities. [1]

Jane Eyre was published alongside the feminist movement and showed readers the new world of the Victorian era. The book is an important early feminist story, the main character Jane Eyre, and other female characters are also representative of the early feminist movement. The essay will explore in detail the various types of characterization in *Jane Eyre* by examining the development of feminism in Victorian England. The story incorporates elements of three different genres respectively. Beginning with the "Bildungsroman" which tells the story of a soft, thin girl's gradual development into maturity and strength, focusing on Jane's emotions and experiences as she grows up. In addition, the novel contains many social criticisms and shows a strong sense of morality and responsibility. Finally, the story displays an overall melancholic emotional quality. Although Jane in the work endures many sufferings, the author never depicts her as a damsel in distress who needs to be saved, thus reflecting Jane's ideological forward thinking in the society.

2. Feminism

The term “feminism” was derived from the French word “feminism” and created by Charles Fourier, a man of Utopia socialism. Feminism was first used in English in the 1890s, and in the mid-to-late 1980s in the Chinese context. Feminism is a social theory and political movement that concentrating on the struggle for women to have equal rights with men under the law and to be given equal status in society, giving them the freedom to determine their own career plans and lifestyles. Feminist theorists aim to explain the nature of inequality, focusing on issues such as gender consciousness and political power. Feminist political activists advocate for social, political and economic equality between the sexes and debate issues such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, and children's education.

Feminism has been stirring in Western society for centuries. The French Revolution was the first to challenge social inequalities and opened the door for women to fight for independence and equality. In 1848, Stanton and Mott convened the first Seneca Falls Convention for women's rights and drafted the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments, which called for women's right to vote and declared that men and women were born equal. In 1851, Susan B. Anthony began campaigning alongside Stanton for women's rights to education, divorce property rights and other rights. The 1870s and 1880s saw the rise of social purity feminism, which opposed alcoholism, violence and sexual excess and saw these male evils as a threat to women and the family. Victorian ideals of femininity prevailed, emphasizing chastity, homemaking and child rearing. Along with women's ongoing struggle for political freedom and legal equality, feminism gradually changed the fabric of Western society. Many political activities carried out by feminist political activists revealed in depth the nature of gender discrimination and increased the equality of women's political rights, economic benefits and social status. [2]

3. Feminism in Jane Eyre

3.1 Pursuit of Equality

The male characters portrayed in *Jane Eyre* are usually in opposition to the female characters and each male character tightly binds Jane Eyre, preventing her from expressing her emotions and opinions independently. “...you are a dependent, you have no money, you ought to beg,... and wear the clothes at our mama's expense...” (Bronte, 1992:5) [3] Injustice from childhood deeply affects Jane's emotions and life as she matures. In order to pursue equality and independence, she had to get rid of Rochester and reject St. John. When she was sure that she could have equal status with Rochester, she came to Rochester and married him. Jane not only wants to be loved as an equal to him, but also wants to be financially independent. At the end of the book, although Rochester loses part of his vision and mobility, he makes Jane feel an unprecedented equality and security and making her become Rochester's spiritual pillar and guide in life.

In the early Victorian era, women needed to exercise their abilities and improve themselves. However, they were strictly bound by the social system and had to put up with machismo. Those rulers in high positions were narrow-minded and convinced that it was only women's duty to make cloth, knit stockings and embroider bags. If female wanted to do more and learn more outside the constraints of the traditional social system, they were condemned and ridiculed. “This reproach of my dependence had become a vague singsong in my ear; very painful and crushing...” (Bronte, 1992:7) [4] As a result of leaving the familiar Thornfield Manor and Rochester, Jane was starving, windswept and isolated on the road, encountering some of the most difficult setbacks and ups and downs in her life. But no matter how painful it was, she decided to leave Rochester and pursue her emotional and moral independence and equality.

Thornfield Hall is Jane's first real home, where she meets Rochester and finds the love she has always longed for. However, she knows that if she lives with Rochester as a housewife, she will have to make self-compromises and place herself on an unequal footing with men. She feared that marrying with Rochester would transcend her class and position and create a relationship of debt with him. Hence the decision to leave Thornfield Hall and Rochester. Although they give Jane a sense of happiness and belonging, she realizes that staying with Rochester is only self-imprisonment. The novel *Jane Eyre* fully demonstrates Jane's opposition to machismo and class hierarchy, her desire for independence and equality and the author's own true reflection.

"I know no weariness of my Edward's society: he knows none of mine, any more than we each do of the pulsation of the heart that beats in our separate bosoms, consequently, we are ever together." (Bronte, 1992:105) Through the trials and tribulations experienced by Jane, the work not only demonstrates her personality and wisdom, but also explores the social background of England at that time and truly reproducing the bleak social reality and cruel hierarchy to the readers.

3.2 Pursuit of Freedom

In her quest for freedom, Jane came to realize that living with men appeared to be spiritual liberation, but in actuality it was freedom of imprisonment. For she had to give up respect and loyalty to herself for the sake of her emotions. "Much enjoyment I do not expect in the life opening before me, yet it will, doubtless, if I regulate my mind and exert my powers as ought, yield me enough to live on from day to day." (Bronte, 1992:367). She lived and worked with St. John in India and was able to act according to her axioms without reservation. St. John gave her the opportunity to utilize her talents to the fullest. But she knows that what appears to be freedom is another form of imprisonment altogether. She needed to hide not only her true feelings, but also her true passions.

In the second chapter of the book, Jane endured the most severe test. She fled Thornfield Manor, endured the pain of leaving Rochester and slept on the streets. Because of this, she exercises her will, courage and survival ability. As she tells herself before leaving Thornfield, "I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, and the more unstable I am, the more I will respect me." (Bronte, 1992: 243) Ultimately, this firm will and strong courage from a woman made her more courageous and determined her relationships and her search for love.

Jane is very happy because of Rochester's love and proposal, but she is very anxious about the marriage. She had always looked forward to freedom and tried to escape her captivity. However, marrying with Rochester goes against her wishes. She fears that she will be bound by her marriage and be caught in a situation where she will be responsible for others and be a lover at the same time. Numerous hints indicate that Charlotte repeatedly tries to find a balance between love and freedom in her characterization of Jane Eyre. Through Jane's voice the author implicitly expresses her intensive views on social class, hierarchy and sexism.

3.3 Pursuit of Love

Childhood experiences are extremely important and can affect a person's attitude towards life in the present and future. Jane was fostered in her aunt's house as a child, looked down upon and regarded as a "bad animal". She was often abused by other people, especially her sister and brothers. She "resisted all the way: a new thing for me, and a circumstance which greatly strengthened the bad opinion Bessie and Miss Abbot were disposed to entertain of me." (Bronte, 1992:46) Later on, she stepped into the society and her inner sense of femininity was further awakened and strengthened. Although she could achieve happiness from a traditional marriage, she needed more than anything else someone who could truly understand her and share her inner world with her. Therefore, she had to face and solve many difficulties alone. "...orphaned, poor, and plain, faced

with the pressures of making her own way in a world which measured the likelihood of her success by the degree of her marriageability.”(Hardy, 1964: 25) [5]

Many consider the most moving plot of the book to be the ups and downs of the love story between Jane and her lover Rochester. She meets Rochester when he is in trouble and is willing to come to Thornfield Hall to offer help, but Rochester refused and aroused her. “I felt no fear of him, and but little shyness. Had he been a handsome, heroic-looking young gentleman, I should not have dared to stand thus questioning him against his will. And offering my services unasked...” (Bronte, 1992:114). At first Jane did not realize that Rochester was her master, but just thought it was normal to help strangers in trouble and in need. Perhaps it was at that moment that she began to feel cared for and needed, and wanted to take the initiative in pursuing love. When she learns the true identity of the man she meets, she realizes the difference in status and rank between herself and Rochester.

As time went by, Jane begins to understand Rochester further, “unconscious pride”, “so much ease in his demeanor”, “indifference to his own external appearance” (Bronte, 1992:133) are her inner feelings about Rochester. Gradually they both regarded each other as confidants, Rochester also began to slowly understand Jane and confided in her own inner world. “I see, at intervals, the glance of a curious sort of bird through the close-set bars of the cage: a vivid, restless, resolute captive is there were it but free, it will be soar cloud--high. You are still bent ongoing?”(Bronte, 1992:140)

Although the hot flame of love in Jane's heart can not be extinguished, she knows that she is deeply in love with Rochester. But she still managed to keep a clear head, rationalize her feelings and maintain her sincerity. “The governess's experience is frequently indeed bitter, but its results are precious, the mind, feeling, temper are there subjected to a discipline equally painful and priceless.”(Sharpe, 2005:23) [6] Jane tried to get along with Rochester as an equal, she insisted that even if she encountered more suffering, she would keep to maintain the integrity of the personality, economic independence.

Jane never stopped pursuing freedom, equality and human dignity in her quest for love and happiness. Although she loved Rochester passionately, she could never tolerate his condescending savior posture. She believes that except for money and social status, she and Rochester are equal in body and spirit. She knows that being a human being can never lose its value and dignity. “...Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? ---You think wrong!....---it is my spirit that addresses to your spirit, just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal, --- as we are!” (Bronte, 1992:257) The book gives readers a clear picture of Jane Eyre's bold pursuit of love. In the end, Jane gets equal love and lives happily with Rochester.

4. Feminism in other women *Jane Eyre*

4.1 Helen Burns

Helen Burns is one of the iconic female characters in *Jane Eyre*, a friend with Jane at Lowood School and demonstrates many of the qualities of the women of that era. Helen is an angelic girl, a symbol of love, forgiveness and wisdom. She is a Christian saint who emphasizes patience and acceptance and her religious stance gives her an attitude of infinite tolerance in all matters. Her brief appearance in the novel demonstrates the infinite patience and tolerance of the oppressed women of the Victorian era. She is absolutely passive, submissive and accepting of any rejection. Helen is the antithesis of *Jane Eyre*. She influenced by her religious beliefs, like many other women, clings bitterly to their beliefs, acts negatively, humbly succumbs to unjust social treatment and ignores the harsh policies of Lowood School.

Although Helen has mature strength and intelligence, focuses on self-denial rather than

self-affirmation. Her submissiveness and abstinence flank Jane's willfulness and defiance. Her belief in tolerance and love is at odds with Jane's justice and self-respect. Like Jane, She is an orphan who longs for a home, but she always believes that she will find her dream home in heaven, not the reality of northern England. Though she could not forget the injustice of their childhood at Lowood School, she believed that in God's judgment justice would be done, the good would be rewarded and the evil would be punished. Jane never had this blind faith, she needed love and happiness in this real world and wanted support and guidance on her journey through life.

4.2 Bertha Mason

Bertha Mason is an important and rebellious female character in *Jane Eyre*, the antithesis of many of the traditional women in the work. Women are supposed to be quiet, thin, submissive and loyal to their husbands. But Bertha is the polar opposite of the traditional women of her time. She is tall, free-spirited, feisty and is brave enough to pursue her emotions and desires. She dares to challenge the unjust social system and not succumb to the male rulers. Because of her blunt, wild and rebellious character is incompatible with the ideal woman of the Victorian era, she is kept away from society by Rochester in the attic of Thornfield Manor. Just as Jane Eyre was locked up in the Red Room at the beginning of the book, due to her overly outspoken and aggressive behavior as a woman.

The mysterious female character, Bertha, casts a shadow of suspense and terror over the plot and atmosphere of *Jane Eyre*. In addition, the portrayal of the female character of Bertha gives a warning to Rochester's liberal ideas in his youth. The incident of the "mad woman in the attic" (Bronte, 1992:281) is the most famous part of the book, which has caused extensive thinking and interpretation among readers. Bertha represents the horrible marriage in the Victorian era and the madwoman living in the attic reflects the social status of the housewife in the Victorian era, implying the bondage of marriage to women and the limited freedom and autonomy of women in marriage. Bertha causes Jane's marriage to break up, reflecting her opposition to the traditional rules of marriage and the harm they do to women's physical and mental health.

Bertha is typically symbolic in *Jane Eyre* and is a source of mental stress for Jane. Thornfield Hall can be seen as a mirror reflecting English society, in which the relationships between the inhabitants, the buildings and the courtyard are all important story elements of the novel. *Jane Eyre* reflects many of Bertha's positive feminist views, but this does not represent the overall characterization of Victorian women or the entire mentality of women of the time.

5. Feminism in Rochester

5.1 Obedience

Born in a patriarchal society where male dominance was prevalent and hierarchical norms were strict, Rochester grew up in a male-centered family and was familiar with the social norms of the time. In the Victorian era, the man was the center of the family and held dominant power over all other members of the family, holding the entirety of the family's affairs. Patriarchy exert a strong effect on Rochester. As a protector of patriarchy, he often unconsciously succumbed to these social procedures. Man dominance in the family, man primacy in the law and man supremacy in marriage are the three main ways in which Rochester's compromise with patriarchy is manifested.

In addition, the Victorian era adopted the system of primogeniture, whereby the eldest son of a family could inherit all the property and status of the family and could even disinherit his younger siblings. It was only after the enactment of the Administration of Estates Act in 1925 that the system of primogeniture was gradually abolished. Rochester was the second son in the family and had no

right to inherit the family property, even was forced to reduce his estate until he was penniless. He's father was eager to protect the family property and craved for money, hoping to become rich quickly. Therefore, greedy urged him to arrange a wedding full of money and profit for his son, married with Bertha Mason, the daughter of a wealthy West Indian plantation owner and merchant, in order to obtain a dowry of thirty thousand pounds from the other side.

Young Rochester never loved Bertha, never even respected and even never knew her. But out of the rules of patriarchal society, the young and naive man still accepts the marriage arranged by his father for financial reasons. Rochester is a victim of Victorian patriarchy and primogeniture. Because of the system of primogeniture, he was unable to obtain the family property from his elder brother and could only watch himself gradually lose his financial security and be reduced to a pauper. On account of his father's absolute authority in the family and his own desire for Bertha's large dowry, he chooses to succumb to social conventions and mistakenly marries a woman he doesn't love, thus sowing the seeds of misfortune in his marriage.

5.2 Opposition

In the Victorian upper class, marriages were usually established on the basis of wealth, lineage and political power rather than mutual admiration and affection. Marriages so full of power and interest often broke down because they were influenced by tiny outside matters. The marriage of Rochester and Bertha is a stark example of this. Their marriage was only about money and property rather than character and emotion, ultimately led to a devastating end for both men.

Influenced by patriarchy, Rochester steps into an unfortunate marriage that leads to the loss of happiness and gloom in his life. After a long journey to Europe, he finally gets rid of the boring and numb social environment and superficial gold-digging city women. However, he can never find any new women to help him get rid of his hopeless marriage. Finally, he returns to the hellish Thornfield Manor with loneliness and despair. On his way home, he meets Jane Eyre, an ordinary and petite woman. Jane's talent and unique temperament captivated Rochester and he decided to marry her.

When it comes to marriage, Rochester follows his heart as same as Jane. Their common understanding of love and marriage is to respect independence as the premise of true love, true love as the basis of marriage. Rochester was attracted by Jane's noble heart, sincere courage, unique personality and fell in love with her. Although he knew that if he violated the moral norms and risked bigamy to marry her, he would be blamed and despised by the society. But no matter what he faces, he is willing to fight for the pursuit of his own happiness. He will put true love above fame and fortune, take risks for love and the traditional patriarchal system to the end of the struggle. Similarly, Jane does not adhere to the Victorian hierarchy. She insists that independence, equality and like-mindedness is the basis of a happy marriage. Even if she is a penniless governess and the status of the noble gentleman has a huge gap between, but she can not stop her own strong will to marry with Rochester.

6. Conclusion

Jane Eyre is an autobiographical novel by Charlotte Bronte and an extraordinary allegorical story. Through the voices of the characters themselves, the book realistically depicts the life experiences of a young girl and recreates a woman writer's exploration of her own spiritual journey. The three main female figures in *Jane Eyre* are metaphors for the author's rebellion against a patriarchal society and her pursuit of freedom and equality. The novel shows that men and women are born equal and women should enjoy equal status, treatment and rights as men. This paper focuses on analyzing the different characters in *Jane Eyre* from a feminist perspective, which fully reveals the Victorian women's pursuit of freedom, equality and love, as well as the men's submissiveness and

rebellion against the society influenced by feminism.

Charlotte Bronte provides a happy ending to *Jane Eyre*, and she seems to imply that those who are willing to rebel against the existing social order and are courageous enough to pursue their own happiness will ultimately attain eternal love. A woman who refuses to succumb to class hierarchy and sexism, and refuses to accept male domination and social oppression, will ultimately achieve spiritual elevation. Finally, the author argues that a woman's quest and desire for love does not necessarily entail giving up her sense of self and her intellectual, spiritual and emotional independence. People in society, especially women, can truly achieve spiritual liberation and freedom of mind only when they truly know themselves and dare to be themselves without any outside interference.

References

- [1] Gaskell, Elizabeth. C. (1997) *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* [M]. London: Routhledge/Thoemmes Press.
- [2] Deborah L, Madsen. *Feminist Theory and Literary Practice* [M]. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.2006
- [3] Bronte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre* [M]. Oxford: Oxford University Press,1992
- [4] Bronte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. [M]. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing Corporation, 2009
- [5] Hardy, Barbara. *Jane Eyre* [M].London: Macmillan Press Ltd,1964
- [6] Jenny Sharpe.(2005). *From Allegories of Empire* [A]. In Elsie B. Michie. (Eds.)(2006).