

The Image in the Mirror-A Feminist Study on the Autobiographical Elements in *Jane Eyre*

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Abstract: *Jane Eyre*, a full-length novel written by Charlotte Bronte in Victorian era deeply affected females. England was in a harsh reality in the 19th century---women live at the bottom of society and are suffered from male oppression and discrimination. Even educated women are subjected to dependency on the rich because of their poverty. Females in the upper class, however, accepted arranged marriages as their ultimate destination. Thus, Charlotte, as a woman writer, put her own ideals and pursuits in *Jane Eyre* to reveal the unequal status of women and want to use this work to encourage women to fight for their inherent rights. In this way, this paper will find out the similarities between *Jane Eyre* and Charlotte to prove it is an autobiography from feminist prospective.

Keywords: Autobiography, *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte, Feminism.

1. Introduction

1.1. Story Synopsis

Jane Eyre is an orphan who grows up in the home of her aunt and is subjected to all kinds of abuse. She is then sent to the charity school, Lowood School, where she suffers both in soul and body, but she finishes her education with tenacity and distinction. After graduating from the disgusting school, *Jane Eyre* takes a job as a tutor at Mr Rochester's estate, where she is responsible for educating Mr Rochester's daughter. In the process, *Jane Eyre* and Rochester fall in love with each other. But on their wedding day, *Jane Eyre* accidentally learns that Mr Rochester's previous wife is still alive, but insane and imprisoned on the estate. So *Jane Eyre* leaves the manor with heart breaking. Later, she runs into her cousins. Just as *Jane Eyre* hesitates to leave England with her cousin as a missionary wife, Rochester's estate is destroyed by a fire set by his mad wife, and he himself is injured and blinded. With a sense of purpose, *Jane Eyre* rushes back to the manor and finds her beloved Rochester, and the two live happily here after.

1.2. Writing background

When the author writes *Jane Eyre*, England is already the world's number one industrial power. However, the status of women in England has not changed, and they are still in a subordinate and dependent position. The goal of women is to marry into a wealthy family, and even if she could not be born into a wealthy family, she has to work hard to gain wealth and status through marriage. The only choice for a woman's career is to be a good wife and mother. Females who take up writing as a career would be considered to be against proper femininity and would be fiercely attacked by men. The fact that the Charlotte sisters' works are originally written under masculine pseudonyms shows the plight of women writers at the time. It is against this passive background that *Jane Eyre* is written.

For the writing background, three main elements are involved. Firstly, during the Victorian era, women's demands for equal status with men in the family grew, and the feminist movement begins to sprout. The development of female

literature in this period is closely related to the promotion of British women's status and the expansion of female readers. Secondly, the prosperity of critical realistic literature movement in England in the 19th century opens up a new field of literature reflecting social life. At last, the author's own experience leads her to create this famous masterpiece.

1.3. Literature review

Jane Eyre is a masterpiece by the British critical realist writer Charlotte Bronte, which successfully portrays *Jane Eyre* as a woman who dares to rebel and fight for freedom and equality. In the patriarchal society of that time, women are far from subordinate, but *Jane Eyre* refuses to be placed in the traditional position of subordinate status. She dares to defy the prevailing patriarchal consciousness, to fight for her rights and to comment on the role of women in society and the restrictions placed on them. *Jane Eyre* has captivated millions of readers with the power of her spiritual and moral beauty and has become a role model for countless women, a figure of profound relevance in society then and now.

Feminism refers to a social theory and political movement that is primarily informed and motivated by women's experiences. In addition to critiquing social relations, many proponents of feminism also focus on the analysis of gender inequalities and the promotion of women's rights, interests and issues. Literary figures such as Charles Dickens, Thackeray, Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters and George Eliot demonstrated the feminist consciousness in nineteenth-century British and American fiction through their respective works, *Tess*, *The Scarlet Letter* and *Jane Eyre*.

At present, some analysis on *Jane Eyre* have been mentioned in articles: *The Others in Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre: A Postcolonial-Orientalist and Feminist Reading*(Filiz Barin Akman, 2019); *Jane Eyre: The Development of a Female Consciousness*(E. Margaret Fulton, 2019); *Sexual Difference of Love in Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea*(Lee Wool; Kim Jonggab, 2018); *A Comparative Study of Bertha Mason in Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea from a Feminist Perspective*(Jiang Qian, 2018). So, a lot of the articles talk about the characters in *Jane Eyre* or talk about the work from a feminist perspective, but very few articles prove that *Jane Eyre* is an autobiography from the feminist prospective,

which is also the theme of this paper. And it will be talked from the following elements.

2. An Analysis of Autobiographical Elements in Jane Eyre from Feminist Prospective

Charlotte, in the Victorian era, expresses great dissatisfaction with the inequality between men and women because of the influence of social morality. Therefore, she creates Jane Eyre, putting her own feelings on the heroine Jane Eyre. Also, she lays a solid foundation for the development of female literature in the 20th century. Gao, Yanhai points out that Jane Eyre stands for a new lady who has the courage to fight for her own rights and love. By analyzing the contemporary social, historical and cultural background of Victorian period and key points of feminism, her paper points out that Jane gradually becomes a feminist in pursuing independence and equality and true love(2013: 926-931). Through Jane Eyre, Charlotte Bronte realizes her own dream and life pursuit. There she is the master of her own fate (Li, Xiaoyan: 2008: 105-107).

Jane Eyre originates from life, but transcends life. It allows the heroine to pour out her joy, sorrow and life ideals, love and friendship, possessing beautiful, cordial and touching artistic charm(Bob, 2018:267-268). This part analyses the similarities between Jane Eyre and Charlotte from feminist prospective in five aspects: childhood, schooling time, the shadow of Charlotte's sister, being a private teacher and the pursuit of true love.

2.1. The Hard Living Condition in Childhood and Family

Charlotte Bronte has a very unfortunate childhood. Her father is a poor clergyman and the family lead a hard life as they have very little income. Her mother died of cancer when she was five years old. So Charlotte's three sisters, a brother and she are fostered in the home of her aunt Elizabeth Branwell. But fortunately, her father's deep knowledge helps them to read and learn, and this lead to a great interest in literature for them.

Born in a poor pastor's home, Jane Eyre later becomes an orphan who loses her parents. She is then placed in foster care with her aunt, Mrs Reed. After the death of her uncle, Mr Reed, Jane suffers discrimination and abuse for eight years. Because Jane bravely fights back against her bullying cousin, she is imprisoned at the place where Mr Reed died in order to punish her. Physical pain and mental fear lead to Jane serious illness. From then on, she decides to resist this abuse.

Charlotte and Jane do not experience an innocent school life, do not feel the joy of being held in the palm of their parents' hands and do not enjoy their childhood as it should have been. Wang, Jianfeng states in his paper that during Charlotte and Jane's childhood, both of them have the experience of family tragedy. Jane's parents died and Charlotte loses her mother. Charlotte lives together with her aunt, Miss Elizabeth Branwell, things are the same to Jane Eyre who lives with her aunt, Mrs. Reed (Wang, 2015:140). They bravely fight against abuse and contempt. Their pain makes them better able to think and understand reality. The only way for them to survive and be treated equally is to resist.

2.2. The Hard Schooling Time

Charlotte spends eight months at a boarding School, where

there are only hungry, cold, and tedious religious prayers. A cold disease in 1825 leaves half of the children in school being sick and most are infected with tuberculosis. Unfortunately, Charlotte's two sisters died in the serious disease. After that, Charlotte spends two years learning at Roe Head school where she meets her lifelong friends, Ellen Nash and Mary Taylor.

At the age of ten, Jane Eyre is sent to Lowood School, which is in strict and extremely difficult conditions. The principal of Lowood School, who publicly humiliates Jane Eyre and makes her punished in front of students, is a hypocrite. In her first year there, she catches up with a sudden plague, and her best friend Helen died beside her, making the young Jane Eyre feels the cruelty in life. After the year of difficulty, the living and eating conditions are improved for students.

Jane Eyre works very hard and diligently in a school with very poor conditions. Taking advantage of the limited conditions provided by the school, she eventually becomes the first in her first class and is awarded a teaching position for her excellence. She is only 18 years old at this time, but she has already won economic autonomy and could feeds on her knowledge and talent. Then, she stays here for six years as a student and two years as a teacher.

The school destroys the children's physical and mental health with cold and rough upbringing. Jane Eyre and the authoress gradually become mature and independent in such a living environment. The author's such experience let her create the feminist image of Jane Eyre, trying to find the hope of life under the difficult conditions.

2.3. The Shadow of Charlotte's Sister

At the age of eight, Charlotte's mother died of illness. Her sisters and her are sent to a poor boarding school, where two of her older sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, died of lung disease due to the difficult living conditions at school. Then, Charlotte reluctantly returns home with her younger sister Emily.

Jane Eyre meets her best friend Helen after being sent to Lowood School by her aunt. Helen yearns for love but hates sin. She pursues a spiritual, soul world but fails in reality. There is a sharp contrast on characters between Helen and Jane Eyre. Helen takes care of and comfort Jane like a warm sister, also, she teaches Jane to be tolerant. Helen has a firm will and a loving mind, and she says to Jane, "Jane, life is too short to hate others. We all have shortcomings, but when we die, there only a pure spiritual fire leave with us. That's why I never want revenge, never complain the unfair life. We should live in peace and look forward to the end of life." But the next year, the school is also in an infectious disease, which is the cause of Helen's death. This makes little Jane experiences the pain of parting from life and death. In a sense, they are sisters with deep feelings.

When Charlotte was a child, the poor living environment makes her loss of her two sisters, this memory leave the young girl a lifetime of pain. Therefore, based on her childhood experience in boarding school, she created the role of Helen, which is not only the memory of her sister, but also the irony of the society at that time. Still, she places her feelings for her sister in Jane's feelings for Helen.

Jane is a fairly independent person, and she does not depend on her friends. Helen's death also brought her unprecedented grief, but Jane feels that her own life needs to go on. Her powerful inner power soon revives her, placing this precious memory inside. She must be ready to fight for

honor, happiness, and dignity when necessary. Perhaps not suffer so much, because she grew up in it. Jane's strength and perseverance cast her success, which is a great irony to the patriarchal society repressed women.

2.4. The Same Experience to be a Private Teacher

Charlotte is used to work as a private tutor, but finally she gives up the way of making a living because of her antipathy of the discrimination and acrimony for private teacher from those upper-class women. Later she goes to Italy to study French and German for the plan of her own school with the support of her aunt. However, the plan fails because no one comes to school. Her experience in Italy inspires her strong desire to express herself and to devote herself to literary creation.

Due to the long drive, Jane falls asleep without dinner the first night she arrives at the orphanage. The next morning she is starving, but the first breakfast she eats is a burnt porridge. Hungry and tired, Jane eats only a few bites and could not eat any more. The other girls in the orphanage also taste it and give up trying to swallow it. The other teachers have a problem with the school providing such an unpalatable breakfast to the children, but they are only indignant in their hearts. Only Miss Temple can say something bravely.

Jane Eyre is fortunate to have the privilege of being Miss Temple's pupil. And under her influence Jane becomes a person of great virtue and moral character. Jane says: "I owe some of my most valuable knowledge to her guidance." "She acts as my mother and tutor and later becomes my partner." "My association and friendship with Miss Temple have always been a comfort to me"(Charlotte, 2001).

Jane Eyre and Charlotte's experience as governess is the beginning of their contact with the upper class. But both of them have their own personality and do not flatter the rich because of their status as governess. Under Miss Temple's guidance, Jane Eyre acquires a wide and rich knowledge, and her own moral sentiments are constantly being improved. She is also an erudite and talented female figure.

2.5. The Pursuit of Pure Love and Equality

Charlotte worked as a governess in 1839 and 1841, but only for a few months each because she hates the way of social intercourse among upper class. In these two years, Charlotte is proposed: one is her friend Alan's brother and another is a young priest. But both proposals are rejected because she thinks they aren't really in love with her, just customary to marry a wife. In her letter to Alan, Charlotte writes: I have no love for him, nor can I have a strong love to sacrifice my life for him. If I want to get married, I must look at my husband with reverence.

Jane Eyre, Thornfield's tutor, falls in love with her master Mr. Rochester, and finally they hold a romantic wedding. But at the supposed romantic wedding, Jane knows a secret that Rochester already has a wife, which hurts Jane a lot. So she resolutely leaves Thornfield and decisively ends their love. But Rochester wants her to stay, so Jane roars to him: "I have to go! You think I'm gonna stay and be a nobody to you? Am I a machine without feelings? Do I tolerate people taking bread from my mouth and throwing away the water of life in my cup? Is it because I am poor, humble, short, I have no soul, no emotions? No, you are wrong, my soul is as rich as you, my heart is as full as you. If God gives me some beauty and wealth, I would make it difficult for you to leave me. I am not

talking to you according to customs, rules, or even flesh and blood, but my soul and your soul are talking, just as we walk through the grave, stand before God, equal to each other, born equal (Charlotte, 2001)." Later, Jane receives her cousin John's proposal, but John just wants to marry her because of the family mission. So, Jane retorts : "if I do not create for love, it is not for marriage "(Charlotte, 2001).

In this period in England, it is not surprising that the aristocracy has several lovers. But Jane herself cares that "the more alone, the more friendless, the more unsupported, the more I must respect myself". She could not bear to lower her self-respect and personality and become a man's lover, so she chooses to leave and to maintain her independence and dignity. Because in her opinion, with equal freedom, love will be dependent. Although she gives up the person she loved most, she follows the choice of her heart. All of them believe that love must be based on equality, freedom and independence, and oppose the idea of using money and status to measure the value of love. This is Jane's view of love, but also Charlotte's thought of marriage. The authoress expresses her emotions through the behavior of the heroine, Jane Eyre.

3. Conclusion

From the above statement, we can get that Jane Eyre is an autobiography of the authoress, Charlotte. Jane Eyre's image changing in women in the 21st century is the portraiture of the changing of social features and ideology in China(Wang, Wenjing, 2015: 140). The strong, kind and upright qualities of Jane Eyre influence generations of girls, so we are supposed to think about what we have to learn compared with Jane.

For more than a hundred years, Jane Eyre has been an excellent literary work to guide women's self-esteem and self-love. Even in the construction of spiritual civilization today, it still plays a significant part in aesthetic education, worthy of people to read(Li, Xiaobing, 2008: 16-18). Through the story, the authoress expounds her self-awareness of pursuing equality between men and women and her noble sentiment of pursuing true love. The plot of Jane Eyre is full of the authoress's exaggerated feelings, but it expresses her own desire to freedom and love. The great soul she gives to Jane Eyre is a manifestation of her own faith in life.

We need to know that women in modern society should learn from Jane's sense of independence and should not be subservient for money and status. Whether poor or rich, beautiful or mediocre, females must have a good heart and a full mind, and build up our confidence in the pursuit of independence, freedom and equal rights. This is the valuable spiritual legacy of the literary figure of Jane Eyre to the world.

Women in life, should not be a slave to money, not to be subordinate to others, but always maintain an independent and complete self. Love should be based on equality of mind and on its dignity. However, money worship is prevalent in today's society. Many women are extremely realistic and they seek vanity. Even their dating and marriage are almost about money and status. They sometimes do whatever they can to achieve their goals, and even sacrifice their personality and dignity for material enjoyment. Few people can be like Jane Eyre, abandon all for love and personality righteous. Jane Eyre shows us that women should be as independent and individual as she is today. Females should not be subservient to fame and fortune, but should create their own happiness by themselves. Financial independence allows them to keep their personality special and intact, and live with strong

individuality. This is how women can be respected and live their own lives.

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