# *REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN AS VICTIMS IN VICTORIAN FICTION: CHARLOTTE BRONTE'S "JANE EYRE"*

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***Abstract:*** *This paper is intended to look deeper into the literary representation of the physical (and moral abuse) of a nineteenth-century female character, more precisely the title character of Charlotte Brontë's* Jane Eyre. *Our intention is to analyse the manner in which women of poor social status were treated in the Victorian Era and what consequences the respective treatment has on their subsequent development.*

***Keywords*****:** *violence, victim, woman, abuse.*

Charlotte Brontë's literary activity is by far the most significant of the Brontës' and one of the most important contributions to the development of the English novel as a whole – this particular female author wrote a significant number of novels that strove to transform the perception of women's status in a nineteenth-century male-dominated society. Generally, life is considered from the point of view of the woman, while "her male counterpart is important only in so far as he has found a way to her (n.r. the heroine's) heart" (Sejourne 109). The typical heroine to be met with in Charlotte's fiction is not an idealised version of feminity – for the first time, the woman is not an extremely beautiful human being, but rather an ordinary and poor one whose attractiveness to men is not necessarily based on physical appearance.

Of all the novels written by Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* (1847) has enjoyed great popularity since its publication and till contemporary times. The novel opens with Jane, an orphan, isolated ten-year-old, living with the Reeds, a family that dislikes her because she is poor. After daring to confront the Reed children, Jane is sent off to Lowood School, where she continues to suffer privations, but befriends Helen Burns, who upholds a doctrine of Christian forgiveness and tolerance. Despite her security at Lowood, Jane is dissatisfied and yearns for new adventures. She accepts a position as governess at Thornfield Manor and is responsible for teaching a vivacious French girl named Adèle. After some waiting, Jane finally meets her employer, Edward Rochester, a detached man who seems to have a dark past. Although Mr. Rochester is not handsome in the traditional sense, Jane feels an immediate attraction to the man, based on their intellectual communion. She falls in love with Rochester and he eventually asks her to marry him. The wedding ceremony is interrupted by a solicitor from the community, Mason, who reveals that Rochester already has a wife: Mason's sister, Bertha, who is kept in the attic in Thornfield. Rochester confesses to Jane that in his youth he needed to marry the wealthy Bertha for money, but was unaware of her family's history of madness. Despite his best efforts to help her, Bertha eventually descended into a state of complete madness that only her imprisonment could control. Jane still has feelings for Mr. Rochester, but she cannot allow herself to become his mistress: she leaves Thornfield, is helped by the Rivers (St. John, Diana and Mary) family and finds a job as a teacher. She also inherits a large sum of money from her uncle, John Eyre, and splits it with the Rivers, who are in fact her cousins. St. John

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repeatedly asks her to marry him and leave with him to India on a missionary work, but she refuses. She returns to Thornfield, only to find it burnt down by Bertha, and she finds Rochester, who had lost his eyesight and a hand in the fire, at a nearby estate. The two are reunited and soon get married. At the end of the novel, Jane informs the readers that she and Mr. Rochester have been married for ten years, and Mr. Rochester regained sight in one of his eyes in time to see the birth of his first son. By the end of *Jane Eyre*, the eponymous character is a strong, independent woman, who has managed to reach a balance between passion and reason.

Various labels have been applied to Jane Eyre along time; first of all, the novel was conceived as a bildungsroman, since it deals with the formative years of the main character, whose moral and psychological development is depicted[1]. The main quest in Jane Eyre is Jane's search for family, for a sense of belonging and love. However, this search is constantly tempered by Jane's need for independence. She begins the novel as an unloved orphan who is almost obsessed with finding love as a way to establish her own identity and achieve happiness. She does not feel as though she has found her true family until she falls in love with Mr. Rochester at Thornfield. However, she is unable to accept Mr. Rochester's first marriage proposal because she realizes that their marriage - one based on unequal social standing - would compromise her autonomy. Jane similarly denies St. John's marriage proposal, as it would be one of duty, not of passion. Only when she gains financial and emotional autonomy, after having received her inheritance and the familial love of her cousins, can Jane accept Rochester's offer. In fact, the blinded Rochester is more dependent on her (at least until he regains his sight). Within her marriage to Rochester, Jane finally feels completely liberated, bringing her dual quests for family and independence to a satisfying conclusion.

Secondly, the Gothic elements that are present throughout the pages of the novel made one value the Gothic substance of the novel: rather popular in the 18th to early 19th centuries, Gothic novels are characterized by an atmosphere of mystery and horror and have a pseudo-medieval setting[2]; they focus on the mysterious, take place in dark, sometimes exotic, settings (often houses that appear to be haunted); but still entail an element of romance. Brontë uses many elements of the Gothic literary tradition to shape an impression of suspense and drama in the novel. First of all, she resorts to Gothic techniques in order to set the stage for the story. Thus, in their majority, the narrative takes place in a gloomy mansion, Thornfield Hall, "a fine old hall, rather neglected of late years perhaps, but still it is a respectable place; yet you know in winter-time one feels dreary quite alone in the best quarters" (*Jane Eyre*, Chapter 11). The manor has secret chambers and there is a mysterious demonic laugh that belongs to the madwoman in the attic. The novelist also introduces a sense of the supernatural, alluding to terrifying ghosts of dead characters (Mr. Reed):

> Shaking my hair from my eyes, I lifted my head and tried to look boldly round the dark room; at this moment a light gleamed on the wall. Was it, I asked myself, a ray from the moon penetrating some aperture in the blind? No; moonlight was still, and this stirred; while I gazed, it glided up to the ceiling and quivered over my head. I can now conjecture readily that this streak of light was, in all likelihood, a gleam from a lantern carried by some one across the lawn: but then, prepared as my mind was for horror, shaken as my nerves were by agitation, I thought the swift darting beam was a herald of some coming vision from another

[1] http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bildungsroman.
[2] cf. http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/Gothic%2Bnovel



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> world. My heart beat thick, my head grew hot; a sound filled my ears, which I deemed the rushing of wings; something seemed near me; I was oppressed, suffocated: endurance broke down; I rushed to the door and shook the lock in desperate effort. (Chapter 2)

The double is a frequent feature of the Gothic novel, and in a sense Jane and the madwoman in Rochester's attic are doubles - two wives, one of whom is sane, and the other insane. More importantly, however, Brontë uses the Gothic stereotype of the Byronic hero to formulate the primary conflict of the text, to be discovered in the very physical appearance of the man:

> "with his broad and jetty eyebrows; his square forehead, made squarer by the horizontal sweep of his black hair. I recognised his decisive nose, more remarkable for character than beauty; his full nostrils, denoting, I thought, choler; his grim mouth, chin, and jaw - yes, all three were very grim, and no mistake. His shape, now divested of cloak, I perceived harmonised in squareness with his physiognomy" (Chapter 13).

A dark and rather detached man, Edward Rochester is the focal point of the passionate romance in the novel and ultimately directs Jane's behaviour beginning at her time at Thornfield.

Not less important is the approach to the novel via its feminist content. Indeed, *Jane Eyre* awakened women's awareness to be independent and added more value to the life of a woman in the Victorian era. In the nineteenth century, women were considered to be subordinated to men, as they were forced to depend on the latter physically, financially and spiritually. The male characters' repeated oppression upon the heroine of the novel reveals the low social status of women in that period of time. It is beyond any doubt that Charlotte Brontë brought about the idea of feminism in this novel, but it is equally true that she did not intend to demonstrate the concept perfectly. The ideology of feminism is supposed to advocate equality (be it political, legal, educational, or even intellectual) between the sexes. On the other hand, *Jane Eyre* asserts the woman's right to love and lead a happy sentimental life; the heroine of this novel is entitled to obtaining happiness "provided she does not leave the path of virtue" (Sejourne 137). In its pages, the man would be bound for destruction without the woman's support (see Rochester).

The objective of this paper is to bring into discussion another aspect that is worth mentioning when talking about Victorian women: the abuse and manipulation that marked their lives and *Jane Eyre* is again an illustrative example in this sense, such episodes being scattered throughout her existence.

Jane's status of an orphan child gives way to abusive behaviour from the beginning. Her life until the age of ten is marked by constant abuse perpetrated against her by her aggressive cousin, John Reed, a fourteen-year-old schoolboy, as well as by the mockery of the household, and, very importantly, by the physical and mental abuse of her Aunt Reed. In fact, the first episode of physical assault reveals to the reader from the first chapter of the novel, when John throws a heavy book at her head on account of her being inferior to his social class. The clash between the two children is rendered by the novelist with striking detail, as follows:

> "You have no business to take our books; you are a dependent, mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to



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> live here with gentlemen's children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mama's expense. Now, I'll teach you to rummage my bookshelves: for they ARE mine; all the house belongs to me, or will do in a few years. Go and stand by the door, out of the way of the mirror and the windows."
>
> I did so, not at first aware what was his intention; but when I saw him lift and poise the book and stand in act to hurl it, I instinctively started aside with a cry of alarm: not soon enough, however; the volume was flung, it hit me, and I fell, striking my head against the door and cutting it. The cut bled, the pain was sharp: my terror had passed its climax; other feelings succeeded." (Chapter I)

The girl's reaction to the treatment is only verbal, as she dares to address with such words as: "Wicked and cruel boy!" I said. "You are like a murderer - you are like a slave –driver - you are like the Roman emperors!" (Chapter I). However, the assault continues:

> "He ran headlong at me: I felt him grasp my hair and my shoulder: he had closed with a desperate thing. I really saw in him a tyrant, a murderer. I felt a drop or two of blood from my head trickle down my neck, and was sensible of somewhat pungent suffering: these sensations for the time predominated over fear, and I received him in frantic sort. I don't very well know what I did with my hands, but he called me "Rat! Rat!" and bellowed out aloud." (Chapter I)

Though a victim in this conflict, the little girl continues to suffer the same kind of treatment when she is sent to the Red Room, "a square chamber, very seldom slept in", where she is forced to recollect the moments experienced and to draw painful conclusions:

> All John Reed's violent tyrannies, all his sisters' proud indifference, all his mother's aversion, all the servants' partiality, turned up in my disturbed mind like a dark deposit in a turbid well. Why was I always suffering, always browbeaten, always accused, for ever condemned?

Moreover, the continuous verbal and physical mistreatment significantly alters the inner structure of the girl, who realizes that her "worse ailment was an unutterable wretchedness of mind: a wretchedness which kept drawing from me silent tears".

After Jane recovers from the abuse perpetrated against her by John Reed, one if the servants, Miss Abbot, says of Jane, "If she were a nice, pretty child, one might compassionate her forlornness; but one really cannot care for such a little toad as that" (Brontë 28).

John's physical abuse of Jane is not the only abuse to be met with in this novel. Although her cousin's attitude inflicts pain on her, it is the abuse of her Aunt Reed that hurts the little girl the most. Aunt Reed's first maltreatment of Jane is described on the first page of the novel. Aunt Reed gathers her children around her for a happy family moment. Jane, however, is excluded from the group and forced to witness the scene from the outside. Jane says,

> "[Aunt Reed] regretted to be under the necessity of keeping me at a distance; but that until she could discover by her own observation that I was endeavouring in good earnest to acquire a more sociable and childlike disposition, a more attractive and sprightly manner, she really must exclude me from privileges intended only for contented, happy little children" (Chapter I).



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Aunt Reed later resorts to physical abuse when she shakes Jane soundly and boxes her ears. Even after such a treatment, the woman thinks Jane has not endured enough and orders the maids to lock the girl in the red room, a cold, silent room which the latter believes to be haunted by her uncle's ghost. After spending time in the Red Room, Jane suffers a fit and, for several days after this moment, she falls in and out of consciousness. The time spent there alters her soul and, after getting out, she no longer enjoys her normal pleasures.

Jane's only solace at the Reeds' seems to be Bessie the nurse. After Jane is locked in the Red Room, Bessie wants to alleviate Jane's pain by offering the little girl her favourite books and foods. Nevertheless, Bessie never tries to stop the abuse of Jane and often makes things worse by telling on Jane for minor incidents. Jane thinks of Bessie in the following terms:

> "When gentle, Bessie seemed to me the best, prettiest, kindest being in the world; and I wished most intensely that she would always be so pleasant and amiable, and never push me about or scold, or task my unreasonably as she was too often wont to do" (Chapter 3).

Forced to cope with such a cruel treatment from her relatives and from the servants of the house as well, little Jane finds refuge in the feelings she develops for a toy:

> "human beings must love something, and, in the dearth of worthier objects of affection, I contrived to find a pleasure in loving and cherishing a faded graven image, shabby as a miniature scarecrow. It puzzles me now to remember with what absurd sincerity I doated on this little toy, half fancying it alive and capable of sensation. I could not sleep unless it was folded in my night-gown; and when it lay there safe and warm, I was comparatively happy, believing it to be happy likewise" (Chapter 3).

Along time, there have been numerous attempts at identifying the novel *Jane Eyre* with a feminist manifesto. By means of the maine female character, the novelist manages to illustrate feminine power and need of independence, and when Jane Eyre and Rochester finally get married, they do so as equals, with Jane being "her own mistress". In that patriarchal society, the female character that has been under discussion manages to reach a balance between independence and wealth but, at the same time, claims that she will not depend on the man she has married. It can safely be argued that, by the end of this literary work, gender roles have somewhat been reversed, with the man depending on the woman to "be his eyes and his hands".

Throughout *Jane Eyre*, the female protagonist finds herself forced to escape from a dominant masculine figure who attempts to hurt her or force her to abandon her morality or disregard her sentiments. At some level, each male figure in the novel seems prone to an oppressive and controlling attitude, trying to exert male power over Jane as a woman. Jane fights back against the sadistic John Reed, escapes the religious hypocrisy and forced starvation endured at the hands of Mr. Brocklehurst, refuses to be Rochester's mistress although he threatens her with violence, denies St John Rivers a loveless marriage and the prospect of rape, and finally marries Rochester as his equal, although it can even be said that he now depends upon her. Her exertion of power against these male figures represents an opposing view to that which was common at the time. Thus, overall, the novel is thought to depict a patriarchal society in which women



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were expected to know their place. The fact that Charlotte Brontë challenges this patriarchal society through the character of Jane makes the novel scathing and critical of the role of women in the 19th century.

In addition to its being approached as a manifesto of feminism, *Jane Eyre* could be identified more broadly as a novel of power to the oppressed class. Jane Eyre challenges the notion that poverty is an offence, which is obvious from the fact that some of the best people in the novel are destitute and deprived. She manages to give a voice to the powerless by exerting her own power over those who attempt to withhold it; she knows what is right and wrong and the readers sympathise with her options, while Brontë simultaneously positions us to see the injustice exerted by the upper, ruling class.

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