CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S 'ROCHESTER' PORTRAYED AS 'CUPID/EROS': THE BLENDING OF PAGAN AND CHRISTIAN IMAGERY IN JANE EYRE'S VICTORIAN SPIRITUALITY

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Abstract:In Cupid and Psyche, the male protagonist rebels against his mother's (Venus') domineering behaviour and immoral conduct. Similarly, in Brontë's Christianized story, Rochester struggles to dissociate himself from morally wrong states of mind: lust, drunkenness and irrationality. His half-man, half-beast association with the pagan and faery world of Beauty and the Beast also links his character with the 'serpent' that Psyche is supposed to marry at the beginning of her tale. Moreover, Cupid is armed with a lyre in the same manner in which Rochester has his piano. His intelligence and education lean towards art, music, opera, ballet, poetry, drama, literature and painting, which illustrates the vital connection between erotic and artistic activity –a connection that Rochester shares with Eros himself. Furthermore, the arrows of Cupid are a personification of the sun mirrored by the penetrating gaze of Rochester:[1] *'He [Rochester] searched my face [Jane's] with eyes that I saw were dark, irate and piercing.'*[2]

Keywords: Cupid, Eros, Rochester, Christianized story

In Charlotte Brontë's Victorian masterpiece, *Jane Eyre*, the main male character (Rochester) is portrayed as an archetypal Cupid/Eros, thus blending the pagan imagery of Greek mythology (similarly to the fairy tale of *Cupid and Psyche*) with a Christian understanding of spirituality. Rochester is 'Olympian' and Jane is 'terrestrial' in the same manner in which Cupid is a god and Psyche is a mortal woman. Rochester is an English gentleman whose mundane equivalents of deity and royalty are his: aristocratic lineage, lordly air and acquired wealth. According to Victorian norms, social superiority parallels spiritual hierarchy. It was the aristocratic mentality that upper class membership reflects privilege from God. Rochester's riches are an excuse to be idle and a means to a life of pleasure. He benefits from higher education and acquires cultural depth without becoming an actual intellectual the likes of John Rivers. His artistic pursuits are normal to his station and his landed property displays aesthetic sense and sympathy with nature. Moreover, given his class and ancestry, he is a Christian but not a Puritan: his suggested Catholic roots and beliefs are strongly contrasted by Jane's Protestant convictions.[3]

A Feminist Viewpoint

The outlines of Psyche's story work on at least three levels: narrative, moral and spiritual. Brontë's novel parallels the myth on these same levels. On a moral level, in Jane's story, there are various aspects that can be interpreted according to Victorian conventions. Rochester's attempt at seduction and a bigamous union are punished by the loss of a hand and an eye. Moreover, his weakness for sensual beauty is purged by the destruction of his house. As a result of the punishment, he acknowledges his guilt and stops placing importance on the material and frivolous aspects of life. His repentance and Bertha's death make his marriage to

[1] Cf. Imlay, E., *Charlotte Bronte and the Mysteries of Love: Myth and Allegory in* Jane Eyre, Kindle Location 718-45.
[2]Brontë, C., *Jane Eyre*, Feedbooks: 1847, http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1260. Accessed 22.05.2017, p. 134
[3] Cf. Imlay, *op. cit.*, Kindle Location 753-5

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Jane possible once more. This type of happy ending is mandatory for a fairy-tale narrative that follows the conventions of the 'happy ever after' theme. However, the ending is also strangely blended with the realistic motifs of life-long female devotion and crippled male physicality in Charlotte Brontë's novel. Rochester's pride is humbled, his male patronage is destroyed and his arrogance is punished when he becomes dependent on Jane. The half-happy ending of the novel is not fully consistent with the fairy tale narrative, but there are mythical and metaphysical implications to Rochester's blindness and lameness.[4]

On a spiritual level, Rochester's lost hand and eye are highly suggestive and they make for powerfully sacrificial imagery in reference to verse 29 in Matthew 5:[5] 'And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from you: for it is profitable for you that one of your members should perish, and not that your whole body should be cast into hell.'[6] Moreover, Jane herself is metaphorically torn apart when she has to make the sacrifice of leaving Rochester in order to avoid sin: 'you shall tear yourself away, none shall help you: you shall yourself pluck out your right eye; yourself cut off your right hand: your heart shall be the victim, and you the priest to transfix it.'[7]

The Blending of Pagan and Christian Imagery

Christian imagery of sacrifice is reinforced by further suffering that Jane endures on her uphill journey to Whitcross. The scene mirrors the Biblical episode of Christ carrying the cross on His way to crucifixion. Nevertheless, Jane's painful experience is mild compared to that of Rochester who not only suffers with her but also endures suffering for her. Along with the destruction of his property and the impairment of his body, he takes on all blame, guilt and physical punishment in order for their union to be possible. It shows that only 'Love' (Eros/Cupid/Rochester) and not 'Female Virtue, Soulfulness or Sensitivity' (Psyche/Jane) can make the ultimate and sufficient sacrifice. Rochester suffers as the embodiment of 'love' (as Cupid/Eros), whereas Jane suffers as the embodiment of the 'psyche/soul' (as goddess Psyche).[8]

The blending of pagan and Christian imagery is done smoothly through the character of Rochester that becomes both lustful sinner as Cupid and atoning sacrifice as a result of Brontë's masterful use of Christian imagery. Therefore, the thorough assimilation of different religious traditions reflects the authoress' deep understanding of both ancient and Victorian spirituality.[9] It also reflects Charlotte's profoundly imaginative grasp of the Cross as a symbol of 'any situation in which the divine Spirit' suffers 'on earth amongst human limitations.' And it draws 'a parallel between the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, His descent into the underworld and His resurrection, with that of the pagan deities' such as Osiris.'[10] According to Egyptian mythology, Osiris is bound and imprisoned during winter but restored to liberty and health during summer. Similarly, the character of Rochester appears depressed and emotionally vulnerable in January but his fortunes advance through the spring with Jane's love for him. After his triumph over his beloved's heart, his luck begins to fail: Jane forsakes him at harvest time and his environment (property) is destroyed. He is also dismembered and isolated from all that he once held dear. As a result, towards midwinter, he goes into darkness and metaphorical burial. It is only the following summer that his fortunes revive with the return of his beloved Jane on the first of June.[11]

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[4] Cf. *ibid.*, Kindle Location 3530-67
[5] Cf. *ibid.*, Kindle Location 3567-76, 3585
[6] Bible Hub, 2004-2017, http://biblehub.com/, Accessed 22.05.2017.
[7] Brontë, C., *Jane Eyre*, Feedbooks: 1847, http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1260. Accessed 22.05.2017, p. 328
[8] Cf. Imlay, E., *Charlotte Bronte and the Mysteries of Love: Myth and Allegory in* Jane Eyre, Kindle Location 3585.
[9] Cf. *ibid.*, Kindle Location 3594
[10] *ibid.*, Kindle Location 3594-602
[11] Cf. *ibid.*, Kindle Location 3602, 3620

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Therefore, Rochester is portrayed as the equivalent of Eros/Cupid, Osiris and the Christian atoning sacrifice. These are all part of Jane's multiple alter egos that can also be read as symbols of the psychological/emotional process experienced by Charlotte Brontë herself. Jane's love for Rochester is Charlotte's undeclared affection for Constantin Heger – her tutor and professor. In 1845, Brontë is a self-confessed slave to regret and, by 1847, her regrets are turned into a novel – *Jane Eyre*. In the story, the spectacle of Eros is expressive of Victorian sexual repression because Rochester – the embodiment of Cupid – is blinded, lamed, isolated, figuratively buried and sunk into darkness. It is an accurate reflection of Victorian treatment of passion and it is the result of Brontë's failure to consummate her relationship with the one she loved.[12]

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[12] Cf. *ibid.*, Kindle Location 3637-81, 3731

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