

Manifestations of Jane Eyre's Subconscious



Literature

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Abstract

Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) is an English writer whose life has affected her writings especially in the story of *Jane Eyre* (1847). In this novel, we have a young woman who faces and then overcomes different obstacles in her journey to maturity and satisfaction. Charlotte in this novel depicts glances from her own and her sisters' lives. This research deals with the symbolic nature of the story interpreted through the use of "dreams" and their significance as a tool used by the authoress to reveal the inner world of her heroine adding a depth to our understanding of the novel. The research is divided into two sections and a conclusion. Section one is an introductory section devoted to Charlotte Brontë the woman behind the image of *Jane Eyre*, and the reasons why this novel was a success. Section two covers the meaning and significance of *Jane Eyre's* dreams. This section is divided into six parts each of which deals with one or more of the heroine's dreams. The research ends with a conclusion where the results are stated.

Charlotte Brontë and Jane Eyre

When Charlotte was in her twenties, she received a comment from Robert Southey, England's Poet Laureate advising her to abandon literary pursuit because literature and as he stated "cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it." (Charlotte Brontë Biography. n.d. par.1). That response clearly indicates the difficulties women faced when trying to enter the arena of literature in Victorian England. Unlike the outside refusal and discouragement, Charlotte was able to find a sufficient internal motivation and support from her sisters. In her novel *Jane Eyre*, she shares glances from her life with her readers. Some of these glances are:

The School of Cowan Bridge

When this school was opened in 1824, Mr. Brontë Charlotte's father, decided to send his four daughters there. Biographers believe that the way Charlotte describes the Lowood School in *Jane Eyre* reflects the bad conditions the sisters suffered from when they were attending the Crown Bridge School. At that school and because of these conditions, Charlotte lost two of her sisters, Maria and Elizabeth.

The Governess Post

In 1831, Charlotte entered the Misses Wooler's school at Roe Head and though she was offered a teaching post at the school, she declined the position and returned back to Haworth. In 1835, she returned to Roe Head but this time as a governess. She didn't like the post; she believed

that it was more like a slavery job. In 1838 Charlotte was forced to resign after a near mental breakdown.

At that time, being a governess was the only possible position for middle-class women, and then there was Charlotte's family who was in need of money, as a result she had to accept and suffer through two unhappy governess positions. In her novel *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte's heroine is a governess. The authoress was able to depict the minute details of the job due to her experience.

The Hidden Wife

During that time, Charlotte Brontë heard of an event that took place in the neighborhood and spread everywhere. A young governess in a respectable family was married to a gentleman. After a year of their marriage and during which the wife had a baby, they discovered that he has another wife who was insane and that was the reason why gave himself the right to marry again (Gaskell, n.d.). In Charlotte's novel, Mr. Rochester, Charlotte's main character, has a mad wife who is discovered later by Jane Eyre, his beloved.

Love for a Married Person

Another incident that occurs in *Jane Eyre* and has its roots in the novelist's life is her love for a married man. Just as Jane falls in love with Mr. Rochester who is married, Charlotte experienced the same feelings. At the age of twenty six, Charlotte enrolled as a student at the Pensionnat Heger in Brussels to increase her fluency in French and to learn German. She formed an intense but one-sided love for the married headmaster Monsieur Heger (Charlotte Brontë Biography). Two years later, Charlotte had to drop her study and return to England broken-hearted.

The Reasons of the Success

According to Nicholas Johnson, a novel dealing with the mores, manners and customs of the Victorian society would have held little interest except as a documentary or historical document, yet *Jane Eyre* has its power and attraction even to the post modern reader. The reason behind that success is that "Charlotte fabricated the book from the cloth of her own psyche, her own passionate nature, and so, although our culture has changed drastically since the book was written, the insights into human nature which Brontë gave us remain" (2014, par.3).

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) is the story of a young woman told in her own voice in chronological order (Jane Eyre - Charlotte Brontë, 2001, p.16). Some critics consider the novel as the imaginative life of her authoress: the life she might have had and the people she would have liked to meet (Montegut, as quoted in Miriam Allot, 1973, p.133). Others see it as an autobiographical work that says much of Brontë's life from childhood and till the thirties of her life (Linder, 1978, p.31). David Cecil divides the novel into some stages that cover Jane's life: her

life as a child; her life as a governess to Adele; her life as a mistress to a private charity school; and her marriage to Mr. Rochester (as quoted in Miriam Allot, 1973, pp.168-169).

In this novel, the authoress aims at creating mystery and suspense through the use of both: features of plot and narrative techniques. The first device is seen in the esoteric nature of Grace Poole, the visit of the fortune teller, the fire in Rochester's bedroom and the subsequent mystery of what is in the attic; while the narrative techniques are the use of literary symbolism and dreams, both of which are used to convey a gothic and supernatural settings. Through the use of all these literary devices, *Jane Eyre* becomes both "cabalistic and prophetic" (Mystery and Suspense in Brontë's Novel, 2003, p.1). Nestor sees that the figurative language of Brontë is "profoundly suggestive, privileging the imaginative and intuitive of the rational" (1987. p.31). Moreover, Jane's dreams and the symbols they expose reveal the inner Jane, for the novel deals with the secrets of the human heart (Jane Eyre- Charlotte Brontë, p.16). Then there is Siebenschuh who believes that Jane's dreams are "complex mirrors of the inner conflicts and tensions that animate Jane herself and her relations with most of the major characters" (1976, p.304).

Jane Eyre, the heroine of the novel is a lonely person who feels superior, rejects poverty, tells truths and enjoys her freedom (Heilman, as quoted in Miriam Allot, 1973, p.196). The turning point in Jane's life is when she meets then loves Mr. Rochester, a man who comes to affect her balance. She begins having dreams as a means through which her subconscious frees itself of the fears and the pressure imposed on it. Cynthia A. Linder believes that Jane resorts to her dreams to clarify subconsciously what she cannot disentangle (p.55). According to Freud "a dream is a completely asocial mental product; it has nothing to communicate to anyone else; it arises within the subject as compromise between the mental forces struggling in him, it remains unintelligible to the subject himself and is for that reason totally uninteresting to other people" (Keefe, 1979, p.120). Thus, this egoistic nature of the dream makes it a good interpreter of the character. And Jane's dreams come into the same category. These dreams can be divided into six groups:

1. Fear of Beast of Childhood: For seven successive nights, Jane dreams of a child. In a try to interpret her dreams, first she associates them with a saying that "to dream of children was a sure sign of trouble, either to one's self or one's kin" (Brontë, Chapter xxi, p.291); and then with the awful cry she hears in the house, the cry of Bertha Mason, Rochester's mad wife whom he keeps locked in the attic of Thornfield.

Robert Keefe claims that Brontë has an intuitive understanding of the human mind. She understands dreams as a result of repression, a rebellion against the grip of the conscience (p.123). So the significance of the child is that it is a symbol of Jane's childhood; it stands for all the pain she wants to bury in her subconscious. The problem is that such a memory can never die; it is like a sleeping beast, the moment it is disturbed it rises again on the surface. Jane's beast rises because of the struggle within herself between the calm – like image she is trying to maintain and the sudden awakening of some suppressed feelings for Mr. Rochester. It seems that these dreams

reflect Jane's fear of losing her identity when marrying Rochester (Homans, as quoted in Heather Glen, 1997, P.155).

2. Fear of Rejection: Jane dreams of Miss Ingram closing the gate of Thornfield against her and appointing her out (Brontë, Chapter xxii, pp.291). This dream follows a bad piece of news Jane receives from Mrs. Fairfax, who informs her of Mr. Rochester's intention to marry Miss Ingram.

Linder sees that Jane's dream this time reflects her deep emotional disturbance caused by such an unexpected step of Mr. Rochester (p.55). Such a situation puzzles Jane especially that she finds Miss Ingram "a mark beneath jealousy," a woman "too inferior to excite the feeling" (Brontë, Chapter xviii, p.220). Then there is the fact that for Jane, the greatest thing in life is to be loved by a person, this young woman was denied such a gift since her early years of childhood, and now Rochester embodies her wish but there is the threat of losing him (Scargill, as quoted in Miriam Allot, 1973, p.177); accordingly, her puzzlement arouses a fear of rejection within herself revealed through that dream.

3. Fear of Being an Inferior: This time Jane is following the windings of an unknown road; it is raining and she is holding a little child. Mr. Rochester is there too, ahead of her. She tries to call his name but her voice fails her (Brontë, Chapter xxv, p.338).

The images created by Jane's subconscious in this dream reflect a new fear: she is a woman in love for the first time in her life, with a man of unpredictable nature. She expects to reveal more secrets about her lover and that makes her relationship with him an obscure one, the windings of an unknown road. She fears the idea that she might be an inferior of Mr. Rochester, he is moving ahead of her and she cannot reach out for him. So it seems that Jane is aware of some barrier that separates her and her lover (Mystery and Suspense in Brontë's Novel, p.5).

This same fear is repeated in the novel when she calls Mr. Rochester her "superior" (Brontë, Chapter xvi, p.190). So such an idea formed from the beginning and kept within her, is interpreted through this dream when Mr. Rochester proposes to her.

4. Fear of Degradation: In the same night, Jane sees another dream. She is holding a child in her arm; the Thornfield Hall is a ruin, a place of bats and owls. She sees one high shell – like wall which she climbs to have a look on Mr. Rochester who is leaving. The wall collapses and she falls (Brontë, Chapter xxv, p.334). Later in the novel, the destruction of Thornfield comes true when Bertha Mason burns down the estate.

Tom Winnifrith claims that Jane lacks relationships and friends; such emptiness heightens her sense of struggle in the world and makes her feel that she is obliged to snatch as much as she could to compensate for what she has lost, or cannot get easily (1973, p.182).

Her dream this time shows that impulse. For, in spite of the differences between her and Mr. Rochester, Jane convinces herself that they are somehow “equal” (Brontë, Chapter xxiii, p.303). On one hand, Mr. Rochester is not a plain handsome young man who might fit the image of Mr. Right for other women; he has a strange mode of behavior and he is full of surprises. All this forms an air of uniqueness around his character. On the other hand, Jane herself is a unique person. The “rage” Virginia Woolf talks about when saying that Charlotte Brontë “is at war with her lot,” (Bowlby, 1988, p.23) gives the way to the appearance of Jane who, though “poor and obscure, and small and plain,” she is “strange ... almost unearthly thing.” (Brontë, Chapter xxiii, p.305)

In this way, Jane tries to match herself with Mr. Rochester’s world, but she fears the fall that might lead her to the bottom, the collapsing of the wall in her dream. Jane shows in her dream her fear to live alone, Mr. Rochester rides away; to live a barren life, the ruins; surrounded with black thoughts, the bats and owls; and to have no one and nothing left for her except her old burden, the child.

5. Fear of Losing the Self: This time Jane is in the red room at Gateshead. Looking up, she sees the roof resolving to piles of cloud through which a glorious light of a moon shines; then it takes the form of a lady who addressing Jane, says “my daughter, flee temptation.” (Brontë, Chapter xxvii, p.385)

This dream occurs after the discovery of Mr. Rochester’s first alive and mad wife. Such a discovery disturbs Jane’s subconscious: all the phantoms Jane tried to push away to her subconscious are thrown back into her face; she is “a cold, solitary girl again.” (Brontë, Chapter xxvi, p.355). Jane’s dream this time splits her character into two conflicting impulses: the physical impulse against the spiritual one. Her subconscious urges her to escape the former represented by Mr. Rochester for the sake of the latter represented by the angelic form of woman in her dream. Then, there is the moon in Jane’s dream which stands for a spiritual love.

The woman in the dream is more likely the representative of Helen Burns, the child Jane used to know in the charity institution. This child has never approved Jane’s interest in the matters of flesh. Once she said to Jane, “you think too much of the love of human beings; ... the sovereign hand that created your frame, and put life into it, has provided you with other resources than your feeble self” (Brontë, Chapter viii, p.78). According to some feminist critics, Helen Burns represents the spiritual side of Jane’s nature while Bertha Mason, Mr. Rochester’s mad wife, symbolizes her uncontrolled passion (Jane Eyre-Charlotte Brontë, p.9). Linder believes that Charlotte wants her heroine to reject the love that is purely physical for “a truer love” (p.57). So Jane decides this time to follow the spiritual path.

6. Fears of Deceiving the Self: Jane’s new life introduces her to the Rivers family: two sisters and a clergyman brother. She is offered a job, a marriage and a trip to India. The problem is when she starts weighing her gains and losses. Jane’s new life will deprive her of many pleasures

she used to have with Mr. Rochester: the high ranked people will be replaced by poor peasants; the French educated Adele will be replaced by poor and ignorant girls; the Thornfield Hall will be replaced by a humble schoolroom; and more important, Mr. Rochester will be replaced by St. John Rivers who does not admit his love feeling for a young lady and prefers a formal marriage with Jane. St. John Rivers is filled with dispassionate caring; and Jane realizes that if she marries him, he will provide a little but he will not really care for her (Jane Eyre-Analysis of Nature, 1999, p.3). Such a pressure on her subconscious gives the way to the appearance of Mr. Rochester upon the scene again, but in her dreams. He is always in her dreams at some crisis or in some romantic scenes, and when she wakes up she finds herself on her “curtainless bed, trembling and quivering; and then the still, dark night witnessed the convulsion of despair, and heard the burst of passion” (Brontë, Chapter xxxii, p.443). Jane’s fear of deceiving herself prevents her from continuing in the same path. Her love for Mr. Rochester, and above all her love for Jane herself guide her back to Mr. Rochester.

Conclusion

As a result, it seems that the more easy life becomes because of the modern inventions, the more complicated human life becomes because of the difficulties of misunderstanding and the inability to communicate with others. Modern life confuses man a lot; it makes him feel weak and at the same time afraid to show his weakness. Such puzzlement pushes man to hold on to some kind of masks to hide his true nature; and thus pushing all his fears inside him into that big box: his subconscious. The problem is that, that box never keeps its contents. And that is what Jane is going through. Her dreams serve several functions. They forewarn her, and reveal her passionate nature.

Jane has to live with her hidden fears in her dreams. She is unable to get rid of her fears because she cannot risk exposing them openly; she doesn’t want to be considered a weak person. This woman is given the chance to choose between two worlds: either that of Mr. Rochester, the man with whom she does not need to hide behind masks, the man with whom she can be herself and be accepted and loved for what she is; or that of St. John Rivers with whom she should always hold on to her mask, hiding her weakness, pushing her fears into her box and risking the consequences of that process on her life . At the end she chooses Jane’s freedom.

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