

## Aspects of Love and Marriage in *Jane Eyre*

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### Abstract

Two things are central to the situation of the Victorian novel: the striking advance of women novelists and an increase in the subject matter of marriage and family. These two themes are closely related to each other. The most obvious female fictional material was thought to be domestic situations. Women novelists, living in the overwhelmingly paternalistic Victorian society, were subject to restrictions on what they wrote. They were expected to present the image of ideal wives and mothers as required by the male-dominant society. As a result, their works reflected the matrimonial ideology of their time to various degrees. Some of the most interesting novelists, however, were not perfectly at ease with the established social values but questioned or attacked the concept of male dominance and female submission.

Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855), one of the early Victorian women novelists, was not always free from the matrimonial ideology of her time. She was rather conservative in her view of marriage, attaching importance to self-sacrificing love and the devotedness of women. However, she was not at all conventional in creating her heroine Jane Eyre. Her triumphant remark at the end of the novel "Reader, I married him!" was an utterly new voice in English fiction. She was the first heroine to express her love to a gentleman, which was considered at that time as the last thing to do for a respectable lady. She realised her ideal marriage based on love in a time when one's social status or property were more important than love in match-making.

This paper discusses the Victorian social context and its influence on the literary treatment of love and marriage in *Jane Eyre*. I should like to show that through the union of Jane and Rochester, Charlotte attempted to provide us with an untraditional view of marital relations.

## I. Introduction : Women and Marriage in Victorian Society

### The Angel in the House

The early Victorian society in which Charlotte Brontë lived was a society in which the middle class was gaining power in every aspect of social life. It was this middle class which built up the Great Empire and the ideology of Victorianism as well. It was not only the driving force of the Victorian industrial society but also supported the reigning morality and social norms of the Victorian period. In contrast to the upper classes who were dependent on landed estates for their wealth and influence, the middle classes built up their fortunes by their own efforts. Diligence and frugality were the two principal virtues they worshiped.

The middle classes with their puritan ethic developed a holy view of the home. They attached much importance to domestic life, which was quite different from the way of life of the upper classes. We can see the idea of marriage prevalent among the middle classes from the following definition of marriage by William Gladstone : "Marriage derives its essential and specific character from restraint."<sup>\*1</sup> The function of marriage was considered to reside in conquering one's lust. Men were requested to sublimate their carnal desire for the other sex to a spiritual love through the blessed institution of marriage.

The Victorian view of the home was precisely of a haven isolated from the trials and temptations of the world outside. Women were to preside over this sacred precinct of home. It was considered a woman's responsibility to make a happy home and to perform domestic duties. In other words, she was required not to live for herself but to devote herself to the service of others. During the Victorian period, a number of books and pamphlets were written on 'womanliness' or 'the role of woman.' Just by looking through some of their titles such as *Woman in her Social and Domestic Character* (Mrs John Sandford, 1831), *Woman's Mission* (Sarah Lewis, 1839), *The Angel in the House* (Coventry Patmore, 1855), we can gain a general idea of the concept of woman in Victorian society.

In his well-known book *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), John Ruskin emphasizes the sacredness of woman's 'true place and power' in the Home which is 'a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods.'<sup>\*2</sup> He also stresses his opinion that a woman should be educated 'not for self-development, but for self-renunciation.'<sup>\*3</sup> In another influential book *The Daughter of England* (1845), the authoress Mrs Sarah Ellis advocates that a woman should

be subordinate to a man and play her role as wife and mother quietly at home.\*<sup>4</sup>

As a matter of course, there were some protests against women's subordination and their confinement at home. As early as 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft appealed for human rights and the emancipation of women in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman · With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*.<sup>\*5</sup> Her radicalism was, however, far ahead of her time and went on to influence to some extent William Thompson who published *Appeal of One Half of the Human Race, Women, Against the Pretensions of the other Half, Men* (1825). Throughout the early Victorian period, Wollstonecraft was unjustly criticised as an immoral woman. This was partly due to the book *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798) written by her bereaved husband William Godwin. He recorded everything in Mary's life of 38 years including her loves with three men and three attempted suicides. *Memoirs* was labelled as one of the most 'harmful' books in 1798 and as a result, Wollstonecraft came to be morally condemned. It was not until 1869 with the publication of *The Subjection of Women* by John Stuart Mill that the slave-like position of married women came into question. The conservative views regarding home and woman's role were still dominant in the 1840s and 1850s when Charlotte Brontë was writing.

### **The situation of married women**

While marriage was deemed to be the best means of female fulfillment, single women were increasing in number. There was a great imbalance between the sexes ; there were over half a million more women than men in mid-nineteenth-century Britain. To make the situation worse, men were marrying late or not at all and a growing number of bachelors were emigrating to the colonies. The census of 1851 showed that there were 2,765,000 single women over the age of fifteen, and by 1871 this figure had increased to 3,228,700.\*<sup>6</sup> This was a grave situation for women who were virtually denied opportunities for an identity other than as wife and mother.

The actual home situation awaiting the women who were successful in the marriage competition, however, was not always the 'holy' one as was prescribed by Ruskin, Mrs Ellis and others. In addition, there was a real possibility of the husband's fickleness and brutality. It was not until the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 that a wife came to be able to demand a divorce. A wife had no right to her own property and earnings until the Married Women's Property Act of 1870. A French socialist, Flora Tristan, gave a detailed report on the miserable situations of British married women in *Promenades Dans Londres* (1840).<sup>\*7</sup> She observed that wives were

completely subordinate to their lord-like husbands who believed in their ownership of their wives just as they believed in their ownership of their furniture.

While a wife was requested to be an angel at home, a husband had no restrictions as to his behaviour. Walter Allen relates that a 'double standard of morality had been generally taken for granted ; there was one law for the man, another for the woman.'<sup>8</sup> Prostitution was the dark side of Victorian society. It is reported that there were as many brothels as pubs in Victorian London. According to a survey done by Doctor Michael Ryan in 1839, the number of prostitutes in London amounted to as many as 100,000. Nearly half of them were presumed to be girls under the age of twenty. Thomas Carlyle declared that 'chastity among men was as good as dead.'<sup>9</sup>

All these things considered, singleness was in many ways a more attractive position than the married state. Victorian women novelists were faced with these social realities on one hand, and were expected to provide the reader with the images of ideal wives and mothers on the other. As Shirley Foster points out, they reflected the anxieties, anger, and ambivalence of their time with 'an awareness of the profound tensions between new visions of womanhood and the old traditions upon which their lives were founded and to which they still in part adhered.'<sup>10</sup>

## II. Marriage in *JANE EYRE*

### **A belief in the primacy of love**

There is no doubt that Charlotte Brontë believed in the matrimonial ideology of her time ; she had a conviction that marriage was the only means of true emotional fulfillment for women. What she could not accept was the reigning concept of marriage as a financial transaction. Accordingly, she created a heroine who attained her marriage not through her name or property but through her love and moral principles.

The party scene at Thornfield (ch. 17) is quite effective in showing the contrast between Jane and Miss Ingram. According to the standards of the Victorian marriage market, Miss Ingram appears to be the most appropriate mate for Rochester given her money, beauty and social position. Jane is not blessed with any one of these. As a matter of fact, she is excluded from the market place and is isolated among the people at the party. Charlotte set her heroine as an outsider who observed the movements of the guests with her dry critical eyes. Jenni Calder

is acute enough to point out that 'the workings of marriage market, of the standards of upper-class society in selecting mates and making marriages, are seen through the eyes of outsiders for whom there is no possibility, indeed no desire, of becoming involved.'<sup>11</sup>

Jane's critical view of the guests at the party will impress the reader with her own moral standards which are incompatible with the principle of the upper class. Jane observes that Miss Ingram was 'very showy' but she was not *genuine* : she had a fine person, many brilliant attainments ; but her *mind was poor*, her *heart barren* by nature,' (italics mine) concluding that she was 'a mark beneath jealousy : she was too inferior to excite the feeling.' (ch. 18, p. 163)<sup>12</sup> What Ingram lacks here, in fact, is all what Jane possesses. It is clear that Charlotte is attempting to emphasize her heroine's morality and intellectuality in contrast to Ingram's blank beauty.

Moreover, Jane is convinced of her affinity with Rochester. Seeing Rochester among the party, Jane observes :

He is not to them what he is to me,' I thought : 'he is not of their kind. I believe he is of mine ; —I am sure he is, —I feel akin to him, —I understand the language of his countenance and movements ; though rank and wealth sever us widely, I have something in my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves, that assimilates me mentally to him.' (ch. 17, p. 154)

Although this is a euphemistic expression, it implies that there is a physical as well as a mental response between the two. This is more explicit in the Eden-like scene in chapter 23 where Rochester makes a proposal to Jane.

In this scene, the orchard in the moonlight conveys an exotic atmosphere ; the strong scent of Rochester's cigar and a great moth floating in the garden transport the reader to the West Indies where Rochester spent his youth. The reader will feel the same undercurrent of eroticism flowing beneath the two worlds. Rochester's seduction of Jane implies Charlotte's repressed sexuality, which was appalling enough for the Victorian reader who believed that women had no sexual desire. When Jane declares her right to love, however, the focus of the matter shifts from eroticism to human rights. Jane protests against tantalizing Rochester as follows :

'Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong!— I have as much soul as you, —and full as much heart!' (ch. 23, p. 222)

This statement by Jane is often quoted as one example of Charlotte's feminism. It is true that Charlotte was unconventional in the sense that she made her heroine articulate her love (inviting some criticisms), but she was conservative in the sense that, by changing the subject, she avoided writing further about eroticism, which was a more serious taboo than to talk about the rights of women. In the later episodes of love between Jane and Rochester, sexuality will be treated as a temptation Jane has to overcome. In other words, this was the only possible literary treatment of eroticism in Victorian society.

### **Toward Independence**

Although Jane has made an engagement to Rochester, she has a strong aversion to the idea of being provided for by marriage. She fears it will lead to dependence upon Rochester, and a loss of self in the end. Through the bitter experience at the Reeds in which she had been abused for being a *dependence kept* by the benefactress, Jane is now convinced that independence in a true sense cannot be realised without economic independence. In her following letter to W. S. Williams, Charlotte firmly expresses her view concerning woman's independence.

I am glad to learn that Louisa has a chance of a presentation to Queen's College. I hope she will succeed. Do not ---my dear Sir---be indifferent---be earnest about it. Come what may afterwards, an education secured is an advantage gained---a priceless advantage. Come what may it is a step towards independency — and one great curse of a single female life is its dependency.\*<sup>13</sup>

Significantly, most of Charlotte's heroines gained independence before they got married. It was not until they were on equal terms with their mates that they could attain marriage with them. Economic and social status seem for Charlotte after all to be minimal conditions of sexual equality. Charlotte considered that her heroines needed at least some material support to their sense of self which made love possible in a patriarchal society. Helen Moglen shows great insight into this situation of Victorian society :

The advent of industrialization and the growth of the middle class was accompanied by a more diffuse yet more virulent form of patriarchy than any that had existed before. As men became uniquely responsible for the support of the family, women became "possessions," identified with their "masters' " wealth. . . Sexual relationships followed a similar pattern of dominance and submission. Male power was affirmed through an egoistic, aggressive, even violent sexuality. Female sexuality was passive and self-denying.\*<sup>14</sup>

Mutual love was extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, to achieve in the materialistic Victorian society. In order to make Jane attain true love, Charlotte had to give her economic dependence even though it was such an easy solution as inheriting her uncle's property.

The existence of Mrs Rochester (Bertha) appears to be the biggest obstacle to the marriage of Jane and Rochester. The only possible way to realise their love is, as Rochester insists, 'to transgress a mere human law.' (ch. 27, p. 279) What Jane cannot bear, however, is the idea of degrading herself by becoming his mistress. In Jane's understanding, no matter how deep his love may be, a mistress holds an inferior position. That is far from the sexual equality she is aiming at. Jane refuses to be his mistress, therefore, not simply for a moral reason but mainly from a fear of subordination. Her ideal marital relations cannot be realised without human dignity and mutual respect.

For the same reason, Jane must be above sexuality. Bertha is a wretched victim of sensuality without mind, the negative image Jane has to avoid. Bertha is, in fact, represented as an alter ego for Jane ; a menacing form of Jane's resistance to male authority. Gilbert and Guber analyse the contrasts between the two heroines : 'Jane's profound desire to destroy Thornfield, the symbol of Rochester's mastery and of her own servitude, will be acted out by Bertha, who burns down the house and destroys *herself* in the process as if she were an agent of Jane's desire as well as her own.'\*<sup>15</sup>

What Rochester seeks in Jane is the very opposite of that aggressive sexuality of Bertha. He wishes to be purified of all sins from his miserable past. When he is finally defeated, he utters in despair :

Conqueror I might be of the house ; but the inmate would escape to heaven before I could call myself possessor of its clay dwelling-place. And it is you, spirit—with will and energy, and virtue and purity—that I want : not alone your brittle frame. (ch. 27, p. 280)

His words speak eloquently of Jane's spiritual strength. Although Charlotte was conventional in stressing the moral purity of women, she was not conventional at all in the fact that she gave Jane ascendancy over Rochester in terms of moral principles. In deciding to leave Rochester, Jane takes the first crucial step toward independence. She confirms her conviction that marriage must be the union of two people based on mutual respect instead of sexual surrender.

### III. Morality in *JANE EYRE*

#### Human love or divine love?

'I will keep the law given by God ; sanctioned by man.' (ch. 27, p. 279) This was the moral principle which supported Jane during her emotional struggles with Rochester. When St. John requests Jane to be a missionary's wife and serve God with him, she faces another delicate question ; should she live for man or for God? St. John 'claims' Jane --- 'not for my pleasure but for my Sovereign's service.' (ch. 34, p. 354) He considers human passions to be a weakness or a hindrance to his spiritual quest, and therefore believes these must be overcome or repressed. He sacrifices his love toward Miss Oliver, and accordingly expects Jane to live for the greater cause of God like himself.

Jane cannot convince herself that it is God's will she should marry St. John, and therefore she proposes to go with him as a sister instead of a wife. But he will never accept her compromise. He says, 'A sister might any day be taken away from me. I want a wife : the sole helpmeet I can influence efficiently in life and retain absolutely till death.' (*Ibid.*, p. 357) He wants to control her completely. His strong desire to dominate Jane becomes more apparent when he insists that she marry him saying : 'Do not forget if you reject it, it is not me that you deny, but God.' (*Ibid.*, p. 360) His words are proof of his hypocrisy to subject Jane in the name of God. She comes to the conclusion that 'in short, as a man, he would have wished to coerce me into obedience.' (*Ibid.*)

St. John's idea of matrimony was not uncommon in the paternalistic Victorian society ; it was generally taken for granted that women were inferior to men and wives were devoted to their husbands. What St. John wanted Jane to serve was indeed himself instead of God. Although Jane might have succumbed to his male dominance, she could never accept his idea of



love. When he says : 'undoubtedly enough of love would follow upon marriage to render the union right even in your eyes,' she replies : 'I scorn your idea of love. . . I scorn the counterfeit sentiment you offer : yes, St. John, and I scorn you when you offer it.' (ch. 34, p. 359) Helen Moglen aptly comments upon Jane's attitude : 'It is the extraordinary contempt of a virginal young woman for the Victorian concept of sex as duty, for the Victorian denial of the dignity of human passion'\*<sup>16</sup>

St. John believes that the greatest possible way to serve God is to sacrifice his feelings, sexuality and even his life for Him. He is actually leading an ascetic life himself, and yet he does not appear to Jane 'to enjoy that mental serenity, that inward content, which should be the reward of every sincere Christian and practical philanthropists.' (ch. 30, p. 309) As she comes to understand St. John, Jane is distressed by his twisted idea of self-sacrifice ; what he really seeks after is the glory of martyrdom. When she noticed his worldly ambition, 'the veil fell from his hardness and despotism' and Jane felt she was with 'an equal,' 'a man, erring as I.' (ch. 34, p. 358) She is no longer lured into self-abnegation to the service of God.

### **God resides within oneself**

In the Author's Preface for the second edition, Charlotte writes : 'Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last.' In the novel, two of the Evangelical clergymen, Brocklehurst and St. John, are represented as hypocritical and dogmatic persons. Both of them stress the doctrine of Christian humility and the mortification of worldly sentiments whether or not they are practicing it themselves. Helen Burns with whom Jane becomes friends at Lowood School also accepts the doctrine of humility and self-denial. Helen's tranquility and spirituality is impressive, but there is no denying that, as Helen Moglen points out, she 'is the "good girl" who identifies herself completely with authority.'\*<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, Jane does not feel that self-denial or self-sacrifice belong to true Christian morality. She has a strong sense of dignity based on her rigid moral principle, which is indicated in her decision to leave Rochester :

*I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God ; sanctioned by man. (ch. 27, p. 279)*

Since her lonely childhood at the Reeds, she has been supported by God who resides in her heart. He asks her to retain dignity and independence to the end no matter how hard it is.

Jane's 'proud' attitude invited some criticisms. Elizabeth Rigby, one of the contemporary reviewers wrote :

No Christian grace is perceptible upon her, She has inherited in fullest measure the worst sin of our fallen nature---the sin of pride. . . The doctrine of humility is not more foreign to her mind than it is repudiated by her heart. (*The Quaterly Review*, December, 1848)\*<sup>18</sup>

Is it correct to assume that there is no Christian humility in Jane who was quite obedient to God's order? The question at issue is where God exists. Apparently Jane thinks that He resides not in religious authority but in the individual heart. Jane talks to Him directly, not through religious convention. Nobody is allowed to stand between Him and Jane or in His place. Here lies one of the reasons why Rochester, who 'was becoming to me my whole world' (ch. 24, p. 241), or St. John, who asserts 'Through my means, He opens to you a noble career ; as my wife only can you enter upon it' (ch. 34, p. 360), had to be defeated.

Charlotte's concept of God, as we have seen in Jane, contained something dangerous to the order of society, bordering on anti-establishment thoughts. Gilbert and Guber commented on Jane's repressed rage which horrified the Victorians :

. . . it seems not to have been primarily the coarseness and sexuality of *Jane Eyre* which shocked Victorian reviewers (though they disliked those elements in the book), but . . . its "anti-Christian" refusal to accept the forms, customs, and standards of society--- in short, its rebellious feminism.\*<sup>19</sup>

They were disturbed by the heroine's refusal to submit to established authority. But Jane maintained her human dignity and independent will against the temptations for sexual and spiritual surrender. This was what God asked from Jane instead of false self-renunciation.

#### IV. Conclusion : Love Ethics in *JANE EYRE*

##### Maternal love

Jane turned down Rochester's love without marriage as well as St. John's marriage without love ; either of them were far from Jane's ideal marriage. Both Rochester and St. John claim Jane as if they had a right to own Jane as a thing of convenience. Rochester seeks Jane as his redeemer and St. John as his assistant. Jane, however, refuses to let such a false identity be imposed upon her.

In rejecting Rochester and St. John, Jane exhibits her dignity which denies the orthodoxy of female subservience to the male will. Her ideal marital relations are achieved on the condition that the two people are on equal terms both economically and intellectually. It is quite significant that when they meet again at Ferndean, Jane is 'an independent woman', while Rochester is disabled and 'dependent' upon others. He is completely emasculated and has no power to conquer Jane any longer. It is not a lover he requires now but a mother who can cure him and envelop him in her bosom. And it is this function which Jane will gratefully assume.

I love you better now, when I can really be useful to you, than I did in your state of proud independence, when you disdained every part but that of the giver and protector. (ch. 37, p. 392)

Jane is devoted to her husband, which seems to be the conventional way of living of Victorian women. After all, what Charlotte presents us with is domestic love instead of romantic love, and a submissive wife instead of a passionate lover. The following letter evinces Charlotte's conservative view of love. She writes to Mrs Gaskell about her impression on 'The Emancipation of Woman' which J. S. Mill, one of the leading feminists, published in *The Westminster Review* :

I think the writer forgets there is such a thing as self-sacrificing love and disinterested devotion. When I first read the paper, I thought it was the work of a powerful, clear-headed woman, who had a hard, jealous heart, and nerves of bend leather ; of a woman who longed for power, and had never felt affection. To many women, affection is sweet, and power

conquered indifferent——though we all like influence won. (September 20th, 1851)

For Charlotte, sentiment was more important than right. She did not show much interest about the Woman Question of her time. It was partly because of her conservative disposition and partly because of her individualism. On this point, Patricia Beer's comment is illuminating: 'Charlotte Brontë writes of individuals, each with her own frustrations and her solution to them. She does not think in terms of a cause and can see no body of women to lead.'<sup>20</sup> Jane asserted herself, but that was not for the cause of women in general.

### **Anti-paternalism**

Jane will rest content with 'domestic endearments and household joys,' which seems to suggest that true moral happiness lies in quiet performance of domestic duty. Charlotte Brontë, one of the Victorians, was not free from the conviction that marriage was the only means of emotional fulfillment for women. What she attempted to represent is marriage in its best form.

Rochester, an example of male dominance, is now under the loving care of Jane. As is clearly expressed in Jane's words: 'the powerlessness of the strong man touched my heart to the quick' (ch. 37, p. 386), it is not a passionate love but a motherly love that keeps Jane with Rochester. This conclusion implies Charlotte's critical view of paternalism; strong, infallible and superior men are proved to be as erring and vulnerable as women are. The reigning view of the husband as guide and mentor is reversed here. Men and women are equally weak, and therefore in need of mutual help. This is the essential idea of the new marital relation Charlotte depicts. She never allows marriage to be a financial transaction or a ruler-subject relation, but asserts it should be a 'perfect concord' based on human dignity and mutual respect. Neither wholly conventional nor radically feminist, Charlotte Brontë provides us with a perfect union in which a woman finds emotional fulfillment but does not lose her identity.

### **NOTES**

1. Steven Minz, *A Prison of Expectations* (New York University Press, 1985) pp. 128-129
2. John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, Section 68. 石田憲次, 照山正順訳『胡麻と百合』(岩波文庫) P. 149
3. *Ibid.*, Section 69
4. Besides *The Daughter of England*, Mrs Ellis also wrote a series of guides to female conduct such as *The*

*Women of England : their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits* (1838) and *The Wives of England, Their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, and Social Obligations* (1843).

5. 白井堯子訳『女性の権利の擁護』(未来社)。なお本書には詳しい訳者解説があり、参考にした。
6. Shirley Foster, *Victorian Women's Fiction: Marriage, Freedom and the Individual* (Croom Helm, 1985) p. 7  
As for the detailed material used here, I owe a great deal to Foster's critical study and to *The Victorians* edited by Laurence Lerner (Methuen, 1978).
7. 小杉隆男, 浜本正文訳『ロンドン散策』(法政大学出版局), 17章
8. Walter Allen, *The English Novel* (Phoenix House, 1954, reprint, Penguin Books, 1976) p. 143 和知誠之助他訳『イギリスの小説』(文理)
9. *Ibid.*, p. 144
10. Shirley Foster, *op. cit.*, p. 15
11. Jenni Calder, *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (Thames and Hudson, 1976) p. 60
12. The text used here is *A Norton Critical Edition* (W. W. Norton, 1971)
13. Charlotte Brontë's letter to W. S. Williams, July 3rd, 1849. Williams was one of the editors at Smith, Elder & Co. which published *Jane Eyre*.
14. Helen Moglen, *Charlotte Brontë : The Self Conceived* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984) p. 30
15. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Yale University Press, 1979) p. 360. 山田晴子, 薮田美和子訳『屋根裏の狂女』(朝日出版社)
16. Helen Moglen, *op. cit.*, p. 138
17. *Ibid.*, p. 16
18. *Norton Critical Edition*, p. 451
19. Gilbert and Gubar, *op. cit.*, p. 338
20. Patricia Beer, *Reader I Married Him* (Macmillan Press, 1974) p. 88