



Trabajo Fin de Grado

Female Writers, Female Heroines, Female Readers: The
Contribution of Charlotte Brontë and *Jane Eyre*

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2015

Resumen

Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) responde al perfil de una mujer intelectual de pensamiento progresista atrapada en una sociedad victoriana, cuyas ataduras familiares y sociales no le impidieron ejercer su vocación de escritora. En 1847, Charlotte Brontë publicó su mejor novela *Jane Eyre*, su mayor contribución en contra de la represión de la mujer, tanto en el ámbito literario como en el propio movimiento feminista. Víctima de una sociedad misógina, Charlotte tomó las riendas por su mano y se rebeló contra unos códigos patriarcales que le oprimían, haciendo de la ficción su medio de protesta y liberación, y consiguiendo así empatizar con todas sus lectoras. De esta manera, Brontë se convirtió en una reconocida autora del siglo XIX que marcó un antes y un después en la tradición literaria femenina. En esta línea, este trabajo consiste en el análisis de la novela *Jane Eyre* con respecto a la historia literaria y a las dificultades que tuvo la mujer escritora en el siglo XIX para producir sus obras. Además, se centra en la heroína Jane y sus ideas rupturistas para la época victoriana. También habla de su impacto en la sociedad y de qué manera influyó a sus lectoras femeninas. Gracias a la publicación de ciertos clásicos como *A Room of One's Own* (Woolf, 1929) y *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979), la obra de Jane Eyre se percibe como un gran paso hacia delante en esta ardua tarea de alcanzar una posición justa de la mujer en la historia literaria. De la misma manera que la novela constituye cuestionamiento de las convenciones victorianas, su heroína también representa el rechazo a la sumisión en la sociedad. Dado su carácter rupturista, *Jane Eyre* fue considerado un libro radical y no se vio exento de críticas negativas. En esencia, la novela representa un desafío contra la tradición literaria y un alegato en favor la igualdad social, intelectual y moral entre hombre y mujer. La obra de Brontë trata con especial interés la noción del matrimonio en el siglo XIX y defiende una postura moderna con respecto al estado de soltería. En

síntesis, la heroína sostiene unos ideales de autonomía y respeto propio que dejan en un segundo plano la necesidad urgente de un marido para alcanzar el máximo estado de autorrealización. Al mismo tiempo, Jane acoge el matrimonio como el último estado ideal de la mujer siempre que se base en el respeto mutuo y permita la independencia de su espíritu. *Jane Eyre* ejerció un efecto formativo en la historia literaria femenina y actuó como fuente de inspiración de ideales progresistas a sus lectoras. En definitiva, un libro instigador de nuevos ideales que para muchos constituyó una amenaza contra los valores tradicionales.

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I. Introduction

Charlotte Brontë published her best novel, *Jane Eyre*, in 1847 and it became instantly popular. The novel relates the personal journey of a heroine who struggles to survive in a society which in many respects does not make things easy for her. It depicts the growth towards maturity of a rebellious woman who strives to find a balance between her reason and her feelings. Thus, she needs to educate her own character regarding both ‘self-control’ and ‘self-assertion’, which places her in a very difficult position and shows her throughout the novel juggling both repression and self-fulfillment. Essentially, *Jane Eyre* is considered to be an extraordinarily powerful heroine since from the beginning of her story she deliberately embodies the agent of resistance and self-confirmation instead of the place of the victim in order to fight against her oppression. Besides this, she also conveys her right, and consequently all women’s, to prioritize her wellbeing over what society demands of her (Nestor, 50).

This masterfully-written tale came out in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the female writer was not generally accepted in the male-dominated society. It was just a patriarchal system which set women in inferiority, in other words, they were not allowed to work in the same conditions as men. Hence, women were fated to be devoted wives and mothers, what left no room for writing (Woolf, 22-34). As a matter of fact, Charlotte Brontë chose a deliberately ambiguous pseudonym —Currer Bell— so as to avoid being looked on with prejudice (Woolf, 42). *Jane Eyre* was an immediate success and has remained Charlotte Brontë’s most popular work until today (Nestor, 50). Jane struggles for justice and her confrontation against a range of repressions were crucial to make many Victorian women sympathise with her (Nestor, 54). As Brontë gave a female voice to fiction, she stated a new view of reality for women by declaring

what had not been spoken before. Thereby, this intellectual woman of the nineteenth century has reached a privileged position in the history of women's literature (Nestor, 25).

In this paper I am going to analyze Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* a masterpiece which questioned Victorian notions regarding both society and fiction. This female writer is well-known for having broken dogmas and having shown the path ahead to her women readers, including those interested in writing too, who were looking for their own identity in a patriarchal social system. In the first place, I am going to discuss the difficulties of the woman writer in the nineteenth-century by referring to the classical works of *A Room of One's Own* and *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Secondly, I am going to focus on the heroine, *Jane Eyre*, a vehicle Charlotte Brontë used in order to reveal her independent spirit and express many of her feminist ideals. Finally, I am going to explain the reception of the novel in its time. This female literary author broke conventional thoughts and her novel became an icon in the woman's progressive movement of the nineteenth century. In spite of her great success, there was obviously criticism against woman writers and consequently against *Jane Eyre* too. Some detractors considered it as a 'radical book' since it appeared to question the established authority and promote rebellion in society (Rigdy, 82-99). In fact, its transgressive sense had an impact not only in society but also in English literary history. All in all, *Jane Eyre* as literary heroine and Charlotte Brontë as writer rewrote Victorian Woman into a single unit including 'intellect and feeling, passion and reason, rebellion and propriety, transgressive desire and virtue' (Macpherson, 9). *Jane Eyre*'s lasting appeal lays on its defiant character against literary tradition and its outrageous assertion of the moral equality between men and woman, that is, the novel ushered in 'a very public debate

over the nature and the moral relations of middle-class men and women' (Macpherson, blurb).

II. Female Writers: Charlotte Brontë

To begin with this attempt to analyse the topic of women and fiction during the nineteenth-century, it is crucial to make reference to *A Room of One's Own* (1929) by Virginia Woolf, a key work of feminist literary criticism. Initially, Woolf states that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction' (4). Through her work, the author explores the different academic background accessible for men and women together with other material inequalities in their lives. Also, she examines the triumphs in literature of the greater female novelists of the nineteenth-century and recognises the relevance of tradition to coming writers. Firstly, it is crucial to understand the novel as a mirror of reality —a world seen from the writer's point of view, and thus, a representation of real life with 'simplifications and deformations' (Woolf, 60). Secondly, it is basic to assume that the imagination required to build the plot is subdued under immense pressure. Apart from intellectual faculties, perception plays an important role when creating a piece of literary art. Therefore, if this perception does not differentiate properly between what is true and false the piece of writing will be affected by this confusion (61). Woolf reflects on the fact that women have been excluded from experience and from the world around them (58). In addition, oppression exerted by the patriarchal society forced women to be stuck in a house, which brought out indignation and as a result, a sense of anger can be observed in their writings (28). More than that, it was to a large extent the factor of having money that enabled them to enjoy the luxury of idleness and consequently, the time required to spend in readings

and studying other languages, to have the chance of learning grammar and logic and definitely, to acquire a good level of general knowledge. This has to do with cultural autonomy too, since it helped a woman to be more critical and adopt personal positions in any daily life situation. Certainly, women were ‘the protected sex’ (34), ultimately excluded from taking part in many activities that men did and therefore, automatically they were not exposed to the same challenges and achievements (34).

In her extended essay *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf gets closer to nineteenth century female writers when writing about the importance of having no tradition behind them or maybe just a very short one. She argues that ‘the pace, the stride of a man’s mind is too unlike her own for her to lift anything substantial from him successfully’ (64). As a consequence, the act of setting their thoughts on paper was a difficult achievement. She also defends that the freedom of expression is part of the very art and consequently, both lack of tradition and inferiority in tools have certainly taken its toll on female productions. This point placed women on the margins of literature, having to take important steps ahead to cope with a literary work and so, start to build that very literary inheritance (64). The common experiences of women writers as women and their influence upon one another were crucial to the creation of a distinct literary tradition.

When going back in time, Aphra Behn (1640-1689) was the first professional female writer in English literature and therefore, represents the very beginning of a hard path for many women (BBC History: Aphra Behn). She was a great mentor for all women who did not only write for their own delight but also made their livings by their ability to write. She was a middle-class woman who radiated humour, courage and liveliness. Given her personal situation, she had to work under the same conditions as

men and she reached the level of freedom of the mind that allowed her to be free to write what she wanted. She proved that women could make money by writing and taking baby steps ahead, she finally showed that writing was not a mere signal of foolishness but of practice and hard work (Woolf, 54). At that time, women kept being criticized for writing —even called ‘blue stockings with an itch for scribbling’ (55), however it could not be said that a woman cannot earn money by doing literature. Then, women started to be more motivated to write, from aristocracy to middle-class and any other woman in general. Without this pioneer, Charlotte Brontë could have never ever written. She was the one who led the way and masterfully used the language, the one who allowed women to write what they desired. In conclusion, the best compositions are not merely single productions but the consequence of many years of thinking in common, so that ‘the experience of the mass is behind the single voice’ (55). Even though freedom of expression was a crucial aspect in creating art, this lack of tradition has probably been the heaviest burden carried by woman writers (64).

In relation with Woolf’s text, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar also explore nineteenth-century female literature from a feminist perspective in their well-known *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979). Through this work, the authors make reference to the notion of female writers’ search for identity and explain the fact that writing has traditionally been considered as a male profession. For instance, the text alludes to a famous writer Ralph Waldo Emerson who states that writing has a male sexual function. This utterance leaves no room for women in the art of writing. Besides, it also deals with the issue about the challenges of being a female writer during the Victorian Age. The authors explain why women were not taken seriously in that patriarchal social system

that was absolutely restrictive regarding gender roles. Women were expected to deal with domestic stuff and consequently, at most they could write diary writings. As a result, they had to use pseudonyms in their publications, which definitely affected their identity as writers (Woolf, 42). It is also interesting to mention the presence in Gilbert and Gubar's work of the pioneer scholar of the psychology of literary history, Harold Bloom. His theory of 'anxiety of influence' claims that the writer firstly has to learn from their predecessors and metaphorically kill their literary fathers in order to finally create a new original writing (46). Nevertheless, it was a matter of fact that the female writer had very few literary mothers and obviously, her male precursors were considerably different from her. Thus, she could not experience this 'anxiety of influence' because she simply did not 'fit in' (48) Bloom's classic literary model that was totally male and patriarchal (47). As a result, the female author feels an extreme fear called 'anxiety of authorship' that means that she cannot create because she cannot take the father's place and consequently, the act of writing will shatter her soul as a writer (49). Given that only the man will be allowed to be the precursor, the woman suffers from 'inferiorization' (50) derived from an array of negative feelings. Gilbert and Gubar mention in detail these 'phenomena' which led to the woman writer's strife for artistic identity and distinction:

Thus the loneliness of the female artist, her feelings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for sisterly precursors and successors, her urgent sense of her need for a female audience together with her fear of the antagonism of male readers, her culturally conditioned timidity about self-dramatization, her dread of the patriarchal authority of art, her anxiety about the impropriety of female invention. (50)

Therefore, it can be claimed that nineteenth-century female artists felt exasperation and fury over both the misogynistic society they had to live in and the male literary tradition they confronted. Interestingly, this social context affected literature since there is a patriarchal dichotomy in female characters between the monster and the angel. According to Gilbert and Gubar, women's rage was reflected on the figure of the monster. This female character type was mad, disfigured, sinner and usually marginalized due to her bad behavior. *Jane Eyre*'s Bertha Mason is the epitome of this mad woman in the attic since she is locked by her husband in the attic of Thornfield Hall. She embodies passion, violence, sensuality and craziness. On the other hand, the figure of the angel portrays the ideal Victorian model of woman who is involved in a domestic and polite atmosphere. In the book, it is Jane that represents this pureness and calm. However, in *Jane Eyre* this distinction is not that clear since Jane has Bertha's passion and rebelliousness too. This independent and strong nature is observed when Jane rejects an inferior position to men in life.

George Elliot in her work entitled *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* criticized most novels written by and for women since they seem to ignore reality and present a content full of silliness. She attempts to argue why fiction should not be done by women and makes reference to those novels in which the heroine is beautiful, moral and smart and finally she gets happily married to a man she adores. She finds this absolutely unrealistic with plenty of clichés in characters, plots and language. As a result, she states that silly novels weaken women's education because it seems that those who read these kinds of novels will conclude that women do not take advantage of education since they create plots where the heroines are highly educated but self-satisfied, passive and boring. She further claims that the writers of this type of novels have actually read very much even though they are not good enough at writing because they fail in a series

of aspects such as lack of depth, originality and even eloquence in their plots. In spite of this criticism against women writers, George Elliot reminds her audience that there are some positively great female authors who are excluded from this criticism. Charlotte Brontë is one of those striking female artists who outsmarts her colleagues and has definitely left a mark on the female literary history. As a matter of fact, since the publication of *Jane Eyre* in 1847 Charlotte was widely claimed to be a fascinating talented writer and her book has been described as ‘original’ and ‘remarkable’ exhibiting ‘power’, ‘vigour’, ‘truth’, ‘force’ and ‘reality’ (Nestor, 99)

Charlotte Bronte had a rebellious spirit full of creativeness, emotion and passion. Nevertheless, given that this nature was judged as rare during these times, all these feelings had to be usually hidden under a passive attitude and a stoic exterior. This kind of woman was fated to have an unhappy and unfulfilled life. It is for this reason that Charlotte conceives imagination as a fidgety faculty which needs to be exercised and heard by others (Lowes, np)

Focusing on *Jane Eyre*’s plot itself, there are a series of striking points to consider in this analysis of Charlotte Brontë and her repression as a woman writer in the nineteenth century. To start with, it is crucial to be aware that this work is in part a reflection of the author’s biography, a woman writer considered to be progressive in her beliefs. For that reason, this novel which is understood to be a critique of Victorian notions about gender and social class, became the means Charlotte used to denounce those difficulties she overcame in her own life (Anderson, np). According to Melissa Lowes, Charlotte did feel uncomfortable and even unfulfilled because of finding herself in that male-dominated system, from the moment she understood that women were seen as mere social decoration and procreators. It was a society that did not accept her and her ambitions. Consequently, she decided to express her smothered beliefs contradicting

society through her words. In despite of being small in size as well as modest in character, it was her stifled spirit that gave shape to the strength of her literary fantasies. Her writings reveal the image of the female figure equated to slaves imprisoned by circumstances beyond their control, that is, the way Charlotte Brontë felt herself along her life. Charlotte showed in her novel to what extent a woman could search other ways to withdraw from this world, although any possibility appeared to be only another form of limitation.

Due to Brontë's use of autobiographical elements in the novel, the character of Jane embodies the writer's longings and personal opinions as well as her beliefs and feelings. For example, Brontë's insight was altered by anger. It is argued that she got out from the very story in order to deal with some personal complaints (Woolf, 61-62). This notion is observed in the following quotation enunciated by Jane:

Unjust!—unjust!' said my reason, forced by the agonising stimulus into precocious though transitory power: and Resolve, equally wrought up, instigated some strange expedient to achieve escape from insupportable oppression—as running away, or, if that could not be effected, never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die. (Brontë, 23)

As Woolf mentions in her work, Charlotte remembers that she had been denied experience from the world around her. In fact, it is known that she did not experience great adventures along her life. It could be said that the most exciting period was her stay in Brussels, where she fell in love with her teacher of Literature. It was a passionate and obsessive love which left a mark on her and also her work. It was the only time that she left her place, Haworth Parsonage, where she wrote her novels including *Jane Eyre* (García-Doncel Hernández, np). As a consequence of patriarchal oppression, she was

forced to stay in the house since it was the domestic atmosphere that a woman had to be in. This smothering situation brought out indignation and then anger. Not only fury but also ignorance is somehow observed throughout her work. She was aware of the fact that she would have strengthened her genius if she had been conceded the knowledge and the possibility for personal perceptions instead of remaining far from practical experience and exploration of new worlds. This way, the portrayal of Jane Eyre in the novel expresses some longings that are directly related with Charlotte's in real life: 'then I longed for a power of vision which might overpass that limit; which might reach the busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard of but never seen: that then I desired more of practical experience than I possessed' (Brontë, 205). As a result of oppression, the reader can further perceive various emotions such as fear, bitterness and pain, which come from the suffering produced by her restraint passion. 'Who blames me? Many, no doubt, and I shall be called discontented. I could not help it: the restlessness was in my nature; I agitated me to pain sometimes' (Brontë, 206). Hence, if the novel is understood in correspondence to real life, a female-authored novel of the nineteenth century must be seen as a production whose values happen to be altered by the power of patriarchal conventions. These prevailing values imposed by men did ignore women's self-fulfilment and consequently, the female writer often expressed her protest against the canons of the time through her heroine: 'It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex' (Brontë, 207). When admitting that she was 'just a woman' or 'as good as man', it is noticeable that she was taking from her mind something else that just developing the plot itself. At this point, it is easier to sympathize with the difficulties she had to face in order to cope with this huge task of writing during those times. Her real personal values had been conditioned by a

patriarchal model of society. Undoubtedly, Charlotte Brontë's integrity and self-assertion were essential to struggle for artistic 'self-definition' and self-distinction in the male-dominated literary history (Gilbert and Gubar, 50). Then, she was able to write 'as women write', not 'as men write' (Woolf, 63), what constituted a very important progress in her search for a distinctive female literary history (Gilbert and Gubar, 59). Even though her work reflects features that reveal that oppression, Brontë has been claimed to have had the talent (Nestor, 99) to achieve the production of a novel by keeping her mind out of the rigid and dominating classical conventions (Woolf, 63).

According to Virginia Woolf, Charlotte was a victim of her practical ignorance about business and the active world when she sold the copyright of her novels for fifteen hundred pounds instead of having got three hundred a year (59). Education was her best way of getting artistic independence and achieving financial autonomy (Nestor, 54). Therefore, Charlotte worked as a governess in the late 1830s and she used this element for building *Jane Eyre*'s fictional character too. At the beginning, despite her talent, intelligence and self-assurance, Jane experiences harsh conditions as a student at Lowood because she is a poor child. Lack of money becomes a huge pressure on her, since society victimizes her. She keeps acquiring the manners and the education of an aristocrat but she remains penniless and powerless. This is the image Charlotte appears to give of a governess: involved in wealthy Victorian households, teaching as the children's private tutors who were expected to be familiar with aristocratic manners but being paid and treated as servants. When Jane lives at Rochester's manor, she even sometimes feels that they both belong to the same social status due to her manners and wisdom. Nevertheless, she works as a governess, which means that she is merely Rochester's employee. In conclusion, despite her further learning, she continues to be seen as inferior in the social class system.

In connection with this, marriage was seen as another potential solution for a Victorian woman to reach a better social status. However, Charlotte was personally concerned about the issue of the ‘Woman Question’ in the nineteenth-century. For this reason, in spite of her antipathy for being single in life, she refused to consider the married state as a means of evasion and also presented great respect to those women who rejected incompatible marriages (Nestor, 23). Here Charlotte exemplifies her modern spirit by rejecting a better social condition unless she really loves and feels herself loved and respected. Through her novel, the author represents pure love when Jane falls in love with Rochester and does not make the most of the marriage regarding social status. From Charlotte’s perspective, the concept of love is something that goes beyond the common expectations of marriage assumed by social conventions. She thinks that the very meaning of love is based on mutual respect and real emotional attachment (Lowes, np). In the next extract from *Jane Eyre*, the heroine shows Rochester the importance of self-respect when expressing that she just takes care of herself and follows her own feelings:

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! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh;—it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal,—as we are! (Brontë, 482)

In addition, although Charlotte acknowledged the strength of female sexuality (Nestor, 29), she rejected its practice to attract men in any form. She also criticized women who used this sort of feminine wiles because she deemed it as disrespecting

their own honor. For her, lack of self-respect was worse than death itself. Accordingly, Jane's character does not need a man to make her feel worthy, in opposition to Blanche Insgram who is beautiful but not really a pleasant character from the reader's point of view. She appears to be a threat to Jane in her romantic affair with Rochester. However, she is interested in him due to his money and her selfish behavior makes her cold and with no personality. Brontë argues that a good woman cannot live without self-respect and understands the notion of passion as a temporary emotion that could quickly lead to antipathy or carelessness (Lowes, np).

III. Female Heroines: Jane Eyre

Moers invented the term 'heroism' for the characteristic trips, duties and struggles of a female protagonist written by nineteenth century woman novelists. She makes the distinction between 'feminism' and what she calls 'heroism', that is, 'literary feminism'. Thus, according to Moers, there are heroines that have conquered the world by marrying their masters and on the other hand, they are those who have gone through and beyond their masters and finally found their own heroic place in the world. Kate Flint in *The Woman Reader* (40) emphasizes that 'awareness of the possession and employment of knowledge' was crucial to female novelist readers. Furthermore, she argues that expanding knowledge helps not only to identify herself with the character but also to undergo a parallel stage of experience to the subject matter, a powerful personal perception. Charlotte Brontë created the heroine Jane Eyre in order to portray a 'modern' woman of free thoughts, intelligence and ethical character —a mirror of her own personal description. For this reason, this character happens to play a very

important role in the process of finding a distinct female literary tradition. Combining autobiographical elements and romantic notions of the period, Jane is described as a delicate woman, modest, morally strong and clever. Jane is a type of woman who takes control of her own destiny and just follows her own decisions (Woolf, 49-67).

One of the most shocking features of this heroine has to do with sexuality and the way it is handled through the plot. As is observed in the following lines extracted from the novel, Jane clearly breaks with the ideas and expectations of the Victorian society:

I used to rush into strange dreams at night (...) I still again and again met Mr Rochester, always at some exciting crisis; and then the sense of being in his arms, hearing his voice, meeting his eye, touching his hand and cheek, loving him, being loved by him. The hope of passing a lifetime at his side, would be renewed, with all its first force and fire. (...) and then the still, dark night witnessed the convulsion of despair, and heard the burst of passion (Brontë, 702).

The most obvious characteristic regarding this subject matter is its textual inclusion in the novel, ‘verbal banter’ (34). In fact, sexual passion and physical desire are part of the plot, particularly, focusing on the relationship between Rochester and Jane. This transgressive quality of the work resides in both the expression of these feelings among men but also the recognition of their existence in women (Nestor, 29). In the following quotation Jane expresses what she feels about her love for Rochester: ‘perilous; but not without its charm: such as an Indian, perhaps, feels when he slips over the rapid in his canoe’ (Brontë, 577). Charlotte’s heroine proves the necessity of rebellion by reinforcing self-control and differentiates between fondness and sexual love. Jane, as other Charlotte’s heroines, reaches a stimulating but problematic state of ‘female sexual fulfillment’ (Nestor, 29). In terms of sexuality, the heroine finds herself

in a controversial situation since following her ideal for ‘female sexual fulfillment’ (29) she has to achieve both a ‘female independence of spirit and action’ and a ‘feminine dependence in love relationships’ (34). It is interesting to mention that this fulfillment in partnership is widely based on ‘autonomy’ and ‘self-respect’ (32).

In accordance to what was claimed by Gilbert and Gubar, Jane portrays the figure of the ‘angel’ in opposition to Bertha Manson who appears to be the ‘monster’. However, Jane combines angelical and controlled spirit with passion and bravery. Through the character of Helen Burns, the author portrays the very model of woman of the time. She becomes her closest friend during her stay in Lowood, a charity school for female orphans. She happens to impress Jane with her ample knowledge and patience, however her passiveness and practice of the doctrine of Christian endurance is inconsistent with Jane’s thoughts of equity and self-respect (García-Doncel Hernández). For this reason, Jane is not willing to adopt the attitude of ‘angel’ for Rochester when he wants, and what is more, once she replies to him with vehemence ‘I am not an angel, I will be myself’ (Brontë, 498).

Although both the narrator and her heroine seem to agree with the notion of marriage as the ideal stage in life, they also attempt to reinforce the idea of a solitary state too. Charlotte does not only take it as an equal option to marriage but she defends its dignity as well. She argues that the wrong idea is to make of a husband the only goal in a woman’s life. In fiction, Jane Eyre defends the basic equality between men and women based on moral virtues. Despite their aristocratic natures, this spiritual equality allows her to feel sometimes equal to Rochester or even superior to Blanche Ingram. However, she is aware of the fact that it is not moral but actually material conditions that delineate the boundaries among social classes. Regarding the concept of marriage, she argues that the most essential thing is to keep absolute mutual respect for each other

in order to avoid submission. Both spiritual balance and economic independence from the beginning obviously help to keep this equilibrium. Rochester and Jane's final relationship constitutes a clear example: Jane is his wife and also his guide due to his blindness (García-Doncel Hernández, np). Disputably, this conclusion of the novel represents an 'equal relationship with the mutual dependence of the protagonists' (Nestor, 35).

IV. Female Readers: The reception of *Jane Eyre* by women readers

Charlotte Brontë was entirely aware of the fact that as a female writer her work was not going to be taken seriously. As Virginia Woolf claims in *A Room of One's Own*, women works went unsigned or veiled by using male names. Thus, Charlotte chose an ingenious pseudonym which made her production not be looked on with prejudice. This pen-name was Currer Bell (42). She was not believed to have a style of writing and thinking labeled 'feminine' and she felt confident by embracing this neutral nickname. According to David Cody (np), once *Jane Eyre* was produced and published, in 1848 Charlotte decided to reveal to her publishers the authentic identity of her work. Hence, it can be claimed that Charlotte lived her great success under anonymity.

The impact of *Jane Eyre* was immediate and provided a decisive alternative to the traditional moral codes of the dominant middle-class novel. In essence, Charlotte defends the priority of a powerfully autonomous self-sufficiency that leaves social demands in the background. This notion was remarkably important for the Victorian female readers who lived entrapped in the repression of a patriarchal society (Nestor,

29). By means of her novel, Brontë exercised a formative impact on female literary history (36). Elements of fury and disobedience became a source of inspiration for her female audience as well (114):

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer: and it is narrow-minded to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. (Brontë, 207)

Brontë did not only use the female figure of Jane but also that of Bertha to criticize the stereotyped figure of the woman in Victorian Society. So, the writer reflects the passionate woman as the monster in the society she belongs to. Arguably, her novel works not only as a critique but also as a threat to men. The fact that Charlotte mixes both Victorian stereotypes of the woman –the “angel” and the “monster” through both Jane Eyre and Bertha can be understood as her particular declaration against the dichotomy between passion or passiveness that she has to face in her own experience (“The Narratologist”, np).

Despite the fact that *Jane Eyre* was considered a talented piece of art (Nestor, 99), there was an increasing number of detractors (Nestor, 100). One of the most shocking features of the heroine has to do with her sexuality and the way it is handled through the plot. It is understandable that at that time *Jane Eyre* was regarded as a ‘radical book’ by Elizabeth Ridgy in the conservative periodical *A review of Vanity Fair and Jane Eyre* (1848). She states that the novel appears to remove from power the established authority, to violate the human code and also to promote rebellion and Chartism in society. Furthermore, Jane Eyre as a character was criticized for embodying

the sinful and undisciplined nature, and claimed to be empty of all attractive feminine attributes (Ridgy, 82-99).

Taking into account that fiction was in the nineteenth-century one of the main moral agents with a very powerful effect on society (101), *Jane Eyre* got closer to Victorian female readers' feelings due to scenes of 'rebellion', 'liberation', 'self-respect' and 'power'. Besides, its acknowledgement of passion and instinct conquered the imagination of the female audience (100). Considered both inspiring and 'threatening', the book was claimed to be a 'challenge to the status quo' (101).

As a direct consequence of the novel's perception of marriage, love plays a striking role in the work. It is presented as the highest motivation for marriage, and also the hugest inspiration for Charlotte as a writer and what is more, for Jane's adventures. Consequently, *Jane Eyre* constitutes a protest against mercenary marriages which were definitely frequent in the Victorian period. She conceives love as a crucial factor for getting married but it is not the only one. She also takes into account the need to balance power in the partnership, that is, the achievement of spiritual, temperamental and financial equality. Throughout the novel, marriage just for love is presented as reckless, in the same way as marriage without love is seen as immoral (García-Doncel Hernández, np).

Other critics of *Jane Eyre* have expressed discontent with the novel's conclusion (Nestor, 65). Charlotte's attempt to balance power in the relationship suggests a somehow 'disturbing' notion of being equal (66). Once Jane returns to him financially autonomous, Rochester is economically and physically dependent on her. Also, it is claimed that this ending is unnecessary since the state of equal power is present

throughout the novel. For instance, Rochester's sprained ankle in the beginning already made him dependent on Jane (66).

The novel, both in its own time and in today's time, has been seen as a female expression of rebelliousness against limitations in many aspects. Doubtlessly, Charlotte was a literary star that broke conventional thoughts in both life and art, and contributed to chart a distinctive female literary tradition. It is claimed that Brontë attempted to infuse her readers and intellectual women with self-respect and encourage them to actively search their place in the world. In her view, women did not need the support of any men to reach their ultimate form of fulfilment in their own lives (Lowes). The following quote clearly illustrates Jane's independent spirit: 'I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you' (Brontë, 83).

V. Conclusion

Jane Eyre is Charlotte Brontë's most brilliant novel in which she provided her greatest contribution to the cause of women. She was an intellectual woman with progressive ideas, who never left behind her vocation as an artist, even though she had to confront the heavy burden of familial and social demands. Making her way through a misogynistic society, she became a very influential writer whose novels left a mark on female literary history. She fiercely rebelled against the unfair distinction between male and female works and criticized the repression exercised by Victorian codes. She made of her fiction the best way to free herself from social conventions and get closer to the female audience of the time (Nestor, 24).

Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* states that a woman must have money and her own room in order to write fiction, and reflects on the importance of tradition to future female writers. Using as a first mother precursor Aphra Behn, Woolf urges her audience of women to embrace the tradition which includes Charlotte Brontë's work and to spread this legacy for their daughters (55). Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* deal with female-written literature as a distinct female literary tradition that needs to be highlighted. They use the character of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* as the symbol of the repression and the anger of female authors writing in a patriarchal society. These authors conclude by encouraging female writers to escape from the patriarchal dichotomy of the angel and the monster and not to let themselves be restricted by unfair impositions. This is precisely what Brontë does in *Jane Eyre*.

Jane Eyre rebels against Victorian codes as the heroine refuses to submit to male authority. Despite some early criticism, Charlotte Brontë was considered as a talented artist and her novel as a challenge against a literary tradition that denies moral equality between men and woman. Brontë's heroine stresses the necessity of rebellion by reinforcing self-control. Agreeing with the convention of marriage as the ideal stage in life, Jane also attempts to reinforce the idea of a single state by arguing that finding a husband is not the only goal in a woman's life. She believes that the most essential thing is to keep absolute mutual respect in order to avoid submission (García-Doncel Hernández). Given that this fulfillment in partnership is based on 'autonomy' and 'self-respect' (Nestor, 32), her ideal for 'female sexual fulfillment' (29) is the achievement of both a 'female independence of spirit and action' and a 'feminine dependence in love relationships' (34). In this way, the novel ends with the balance of power and mutual dependency of the lovers (35).

Brontë's novel became a source of inspiration for her female readers. Labeled as a 'radical book' (Ridgy) mainly due to sexuality and the way it is managed in the plot, *Jane Eyre* has been seen as a 'inspiring and 'threatening' book which challenged the status quo (Nestor, 101). Definitely, the novel is considered to have provided a rebellious female voice against repression in both reality and fiction.

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