

THE ISSUE OF FEMALE INDEPENDENCE IN CHARLOTTE BRONTE'S JANE EYRE

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Rezumat

Articolul oferă o prezentare generală a caracteristicilor de bază a personajelor feminine din romanul Jane Eyre de Charlotte Bronte. În baza materialelor autobiografice, în roman este analizată starea interioară a personajului principal feminin din literatura Gotică – Jane Eyre.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* was first published in England in October, 1847, and it made a huge splash among the Victorian reading public. The novel was subtitled, „An Autobiography”, and readers through the years have been charmed by the strong voice of the heroine who tells the story of her life. The narrator's habit of addressing the reader directly throughout the book, making statements such as „Gentle reader, may you never feel what I then felt”, and „reader, forgive me for telling the plain truth!” are quite effective in drawing the reader into the action of the novel.

Jane Eyre is a character whose strength and individuality are remarkable for her times. As a model for women readers in the Victorian period and throughout the twentieth century to follow, Jane Eyre encouraged them to make their own choices in living their lives, to develop respect for themselves, and to become individuals. But the early readers of *Jane Eyre* were not all charmed by the heroine's bold personality. Many readers objected to the novel because they felt that it was „unchristian”, taking offense at Brontë's often bitter attacks on certain aspects of religion and the church in contemporary England.

Other Victorian readers felt that the novel was „coarse” because it addresses issues and incidents that were not „proper” for a female narrator to discuss. When Edward Rochester tells Jane of his past history with women, for example, and his possible fathering of Adele Varens, many readers found it highly improper to imagine a man speaking of such matters to a young girl of eighteen. Moreover, Mr. Rochester's plans to marry Jane even though he was married already was a rather shocking situation for a novel to explore. Many readers believed that the writer of the novel was a man, not able to imagine that a woman could possibly write such a story. Brontë 's use of the pen-name, „Currer Bell” encouraged this assumption for some time. Many women writers like Brontë chose to publish under a man's name because publishers, critics, and readers were much more likely to respond well to a work by a man, and because the general belief was that it was Improper for ladies to write at all [1, p.45].

The issue of female independence is central to *Jane Eyre*. Much of the strength of Jane's character comes directly from Brontë who was able to voice a lot of her own thoughts and feelings concerning the life of women in the nineteenth century. Additionally, Brontë based a fair amount of the material in the story on actual events from her own family's life.

In the nineteenth century women had far less personal freedom, and there were few options available for them to support themselves outside of choosing to marry and raise children. Jane's work as a governess represents one of the only respectable ways in which a woman could employ herself if she lacked personal wealth. Even so, governesses were typically treated only a little better than servants, as seen when Mr. Rochester brings his wealthy houseguests to Thornfield and they disdain to interact with Jane at all.

Finally, Jane chooses to return to Mr. Rochester, at a new place, Ferndean, hidden deep in the woods. Ferndean represents a separation from the rest of society which is appropriate, since her relationship with Mr. Rochester is to be a new kind of relationship--one between equals, and based on spiritual love, a concept of marriage quite unusual for its time [3, p.98].

One of the most unusual aspects of *Jane Eyre* is the depiction of Jane's relationship with Mr. Rochester. From the beginning, the novel defies contemporary conventions of the romance in its emphasis on Jane as a plain woman, lacking the physical beauty which usually characterized fictional heroines. As mentioned previously, Mr. Rochester is also described as being physically unattractive, dark, and sullen. At one point soon after their meeting, Mr. Rochester asks Jane if she finds him attractive, and

she surprises him and the reader with a firm „No”. Jane and Mr. Rochester's early conversations also progress in unusual ways; characteristically with his questioning her in terms of her beliefs and opinions, and her honest, if restrained, answers to his unusual questions. As the relationship progresses, Mr. Rochester tests Jane more and more. His first test is with statements designed to provoke a certain response. Then he tests her with his manipulative disguise as the old gypsy woman to try to discover her feelings for him, and with his cruel manner of proposing marriage by first allowing Jane to believe that he intends to marry Blanche Ingram. If Jane is not the typical Victorian heroine, Mr. Rochester is certainly not the typical Victorian hero.

Another fascinating aspect of *Jane Eyre* is Mr. Rochester's mad wife, Bertha Mason Rochester. Some critics, including Sandra Gilbert, interpret Bertha as a double of Jane--representing her „dark side” in psychological terms. Bertha can be said to represent Jane's anger and rage at society's attempts to control her and imprison her in a particular role. Perhaps Bertha's imprisonment at Thornfield can be related to the horrible fear of imprisonment that Jane suffered at being shut up in the terrifying red room at the Reeds' house as a child. Moreover, Bertha appears or is heard laughing at times that mark developments in the relationship between Jane and Mr. Rochester. Many readers feel that the treatment of the pathetic Bertha in the novel undercuts any effort on the author's part to provide an encouraging story for women in presenting Jane as a woman who insists on her own independence.

The language of this novel is the language of the Gothic novel. The story is written in a way so as to make the reader feel the eeriness and the dark nature of the story and surroundings. The Gothic language includes stormy weather, darkness, eerie laughter, unexplained secrets, dreams and signs. The novel is written in a way that makes it very easy and enjoyable to read and understand. The language draws the reader into the story and keeps them interested in what will happen next [4, p.105].

All in all, *Jane Eyre* is the story of an unusual woman who finds a family, who finds a lover, and who finds herself in a world that has not made her growing into adulthood an easy process in any way. Jane progresses from being an unwanted member of a cruel family of cousins who are forced to help her, to finding the ideal family of cousins in the Riverses, who *she* is able to help when she comes into her inheritance from her uncle John. It is this inheritance that gives Jane the freedom to make her own choices and to choose never to be dependent on anyone again. But the choice she makes is to return to the man she loves, who, chastened by his symbolic injuries in the burning of his old home and freed from his earlier marriage by the death of his first wife, is at last able to enter into the kind of spiritual relationship of equality that Jane desires as an independent woman and a strong woman who has always managed to remain true to herself.

Bibliography

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