

**THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE 'NEW WOMAN' IN *JANE EYRE*
BY CHARLOTTE BRONTE**

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Rezumat: *Acest articol prezintă un studiu din perspectiva feminismului a unei din cele mai reprezentative lucrări a literaturii din perioada Victoriană: „Jane Eyre” scrisă de Charlotte Bronte. Deși personajul principal, Jane Eyre, a trăit într-o societate Victoriană, ea întrunește calități ce nu se înscriu în tapajul epocii. Mai mult, un studiu mai profund permite să constatăm că autoarea a conferit acestui personaj trăsături*

caracteristice unei femei luptătoare și independente. Analizând toate etapele din viața lui Jane și comportamentul ei, lucrarea oferă suficiente dovezi care vor dezvălui personalitatea remarcabilă a acestui personaj inedit.

Cuvinte-cheie: *Literatura Victoriană, New Woman, trăsături, caracteristicile personajului, comportament.*

The Victorian Age represents for Britain's history a period of significant changes and transitions. These changes appeared in different spheres: commerce, transport, education and simultaneously affected people's lives. While some were enjoying the benefits of the development, wealth and privileges, others were working very hard in inadequate conditions for their daily bread (Norton, 2004). However, during that time Britain became the richest country in Europe and a strong Empire. The Industrial Revolution led to an amazing growth in economy and later to free trade. The general activities in which people could involve divided in two spheres: public and private. As a rule, the public spheres were attributed to men. They were the providers and protectors of their families as they were believed to be abler to make rational decisions. The women had been taking care of the private spheres; their home and families. Women in the Victorian society had one main role in life, which was to marry and take part in their husbands' interests and businesses. A clear distinction has been created between genders and their roles in the society (Abrams, 2001).

During the reign of Queen Victoria, the woman became an idealistic figure. It is considered that those high expectations for women came from the Queen herself. She served for the society as a role-model, a feministic figure, a good mother, a symbol of 'marital stability and domestic virtue' (Abrams, 2001, p. 1). The daily activities of women were limited mostly to cleaning, cooking and taking care of their children. It was considered that through their housework they brought benefit to their husbands who were working hard to provide for the house and in thus they could contribute even to the society. The Victorian society set demanding expectations for women, and had very precise criteria for what they called 'the ideal woman'. At the same time, women hardly had any rights. Even such an important fact as marriage constituted an agreement between the families of the future wife and the husband (Kames, 2007). Thus, women were not allowed to divorce or show any discontent with their partners. The general condition of women was quite clear: they were not equal to man. William Blackstone, an eighteenth-century English jurist admitted that 'in the eyes of the law husband and wife were one, and that one person was the husband' (Nsaidzedze, 2017). We may deduce from Blackstone's words that the power was in the hands of the husband. The woman's desires and dreams were tight to him. Not only women's rights were very limited in the society but they had almost none in the intimacy of their family. The husbands could easily afford to raise their hands over their wives and to abuse them without any remorse or punishment from the law. The rights were limited even for talented women that tried to make themselves remarked through literature. Virginia Woolf in her essay 'A room of one's own' illustrates the reality that was unpropitious for female writers and the obstacles that they faced. In 'Shakespeare's Sister' Woolf writes: '[...] to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or sound-proof room, was out of questions' (Woolf, 1957, p. 2271).

Virginia Woolf expressed the very little things that women did not have but the existence of those things was important to development of their talent. The society attributed to women a clear but yet very obvious mission: to be mothers. Having children was seen as a 'sweet vocation' and the absence of children in a family – a curse. 'Motherhood was no longer simply a reproductive function, but was imbued with symbolic meaning' (Abrams, 2001, p. 8). The process of giving birth and taking care of children was a part of their identity, a kind of fulfillment. Moreover, motherhood was a social responsibility, a duty for the community. Women spent more time with their children, playing and educating them. The women that did not have children were labelled as unlucky, a failure to their home.

In the late 19th century, the status of women started to change. Middle class and upper-class women demanded political, social and economic rights. As Britain's economy was flourishing, appeared a demand for lower-middle class jobs, particularly in teaching and manufactures. Some of those positions started to be occupied by women. In literature, although many topics were tackled, many works shared a common theme; women's social oppression, their economic demands, their sexual needs (Woods, 2009). Powerful women decided to take the stand and follow their passions like their fathers or brothers did. The Victorian woman changed into the so called 'The New Woman'. It is considered that the term was brought into the language in 1894 after it appeared in several articles written by Sarah Grand (Buzwell, 2014). Grand used the term 'New Woman' as a title above men. 'It was the woman who would have to hold out her hand to man and to educate him out of his moral infancy' (Grand, 1894, p. 271-3). A married 'new woman' was concerned more about her self-identity than her role as a wife or a mother. She used to sell products, to be interested in sports, public life and politics (Rubinstein, 1894). The process of gaining freedom of expression and equality for women was quite long and troublesome. Rubinstein mentions: "A period in which women outnumbered men was thought particularly appropriate to characterize the New Woman as manlike, dowdy, flighty, incompetent and so on. According to Hulda Friederichs (1859), women who were brave enough to demand their rights as human beings equal to men were ridiculed and insulted. In this way was born the first feminist movement in England that had a global impact on women's lives. Therefore, a 'New Woman' character can be characterized as being brave, rebellious, interested in self-development, educated and independent.

The novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte is a representative work of Victorian Age and the product of that specific time and place. It was a century during which women, especially those who were unmarried and poor, had to struggle to live a decent life. Moreover, they had to struggle to make their voice heard. Generally speaking, Jane Eyre, the protagonist of the novel, is very much a typical Victorian girl. She lived in a society where she had almost no rights because of her gender and had little importance due to lack of financial resources and status. Moreover, she was an orphan and there were no close friends or family to protect or help her in any way. Jane's story might represent the emotional reality of Victorian women as she struggles to find her identity in a century that was characterized by male domination.

Jane Eyre was an orphan who lived in Gateshead, the home of her uncle's family. After the death of her uncle, the rest of Reed family treated young Jane with scorn and mischief. She was not allowed to play with her cousins Eliza, Georgiana and John. They enjoyed making fun of her a lot. She did not receive any love or compassion from her uncle's family; she was considered to be a burden. While Jane as a young girl was searching for her own identity, she was taught by her aunt Mrs. Reed how to think about herself. Even the family's maid, Miss Abbot had an attempt in reminding the little girl how she should behave:

"You ought not to think yourself on an equality with the Misses Reed and Master Reed, because missus kindly allows you to be brought up with them. They will have a great deal of money and you will have none: it is your place to be humble, and to try to make yourself agreeable to them" (Bronte: 2003, p. 19).

Mishou (2014) in her article 'Surviving Thornfield: Jane Eyre and 19th century Evolutionary' noted that Jane's behavior is presented as 'an improved offshoot from that feminine identity' (p.11). She acknowledges her own condition but she did not let that to characterize her in a negative way. Shuttleworth (2014), another literary critic shares the same point of view saying that Jane was far from what a Victorian child should be 'seen and not heard'. Jane's behavior from the very beginning was not conventional at all despite being born and educated in a Victorian society. That being said, what makes Jane a different character?

Jane – a rebellious and non-conforming young lady

Even as a child, living in the house of the Reeds family, Jane showed her rebellious character. She did entirely depend on Reed Family but she understood that this is not a plausible reason for them to act so cruelly. She fought as she could to their oppressions and insults using her limited physical power 'Hold her arms, Miss Abbot: she's like a mad cat' (Bronte, 2003, p.16) She verbally attacked her cousin John as a way of self-defense. 'Wicked and cruel boy!' I said. 'You are like a murderer - you are like a slave-driver - you are like them Roman emperors!' (Bronte 2003 p. 14) Jane figured out that her voice had strength and impact. She did understand that her voice was enough to protect herself. According to Mishou (2014, p. 14) 'Jane's rebellion against Mrs. Reed and John represents her feminist consciousness in getting esteem from other people as a decent and respectable person. 'Jane's defiance violates standards for children, but perhaps girls especially.' Another important chapter in Jane's life began at Thornfield, after she starts working as a governess for Adele. Gradually she fell in love with Adele's father, Mr. Rochester despite the fact that she knew that they were very different in terms of status and wealth. This proves that Jane did not feel inferior to anybody and moreover did not let his authority change her. As their relationship was evolving, Mr. Rochester had some attempts in changing Jane according to his own tastes, attempts which failed, declaring that she will not 'stand in the stead of a seraglio'', "She reflects: 'He is not of your order; keep to your caste; and be too self-respecting to lavish the love of the whole heart, soul, and strength, where such a gift is not wanted and would be despised' (Bronte,2003, p.308). Jane's rebellion was seen even in her attitude towards marriage. Once she found out that Rochester was married and his wife was alive,

she left his house with conformity. A typical Victorian girl would gladly accept to get married and find her own place in the intimacy of her own house.

Jane - Educated and aware of her potential

From the very beginning of the novel Jane Eyre showed a special interest for books and education. She could not understand everything she was reading but even the pictures were enough to let her imagination run wild: 'Each picture told a story; mysterious often to my undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings' (Bronte, 2003, p. 10). For such a young girl as Jane, reading was a shelter from chaos, a 'place' where she loved to run to in order to avoid reality: 'With Bewick on my knee, I was then happy: happy at least in my way. I feared nothing but interruption' (Bronte, 2003 p. 11). Jane excels as a student under Miss Temple's guidance for six years and then works as a teacher for additional two years. After she starts working at Thornfield, Jane's life began to settle down. However, this was not what she wanted, she was longing for more adventure and passion in her life: "It is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures [men] to say that [women] ought to confine themselves to making pudding and knitting stockings, to playing the piano and embroidering bags" (Bronte, 2003, p. 207). she underlines the relevance of education in life: "Prejudices, it is well known, are most difficult to eradicate from the heart whose soil has never been loosened or fertilized by education: they grow there, firm as weeds among stones" (Bronte, 2003, p. 651) In Chapter 3, Jane came up with a confident response to Mr. Rochester's proposal "Do you think I am an automaton? A machine without feeling? You think wrong – I have much soul as you – and full as much heart..." (Bronte, 2003). Her own words reveal ownership and courage for recognizing self-worth. Jane won't let their gender differences be a gap between her and Mr. Rochester.

Jane – Financially Independent

A Victorian Woman depended financially on her husband as she was constantly busy with the house. At the beginning of the novel readers meet Jane as a poor orphan, absolutely dependent on her uncle's family; there were no parents to look after her. As soon as she finished the school, Jane searched for a Job. She started working as a governess at Thornfield. This particular chapter from Jane's life was a turning point. After she received the inheritance from her uncle, Jane was rich enough to stand in front of Mr. Rochester as an equal. Money was not that important to Jane as the sense of 'equality' in the face of her husband. Marrying him after she was financially independent shows the fact that she entered into a marriage where love was the only reason of her actions. 'I ask you to pass through life at my side – to be my second self, and best earthly companion' (Bonte, 2003, p. 483). Finally, being financially independent Jane could easily consider herself: free. Money represented for her just the bridge to her freedom and the road to total independence.

Jane – a free human being

Generally speaking, Jane's life had its own ups and downs. Every stage consisted of occasional sorrows and barriers that eventually allowed Jane to find her freedom. Hagan (1971) considers that 'Jane Eyre is a novel of liberation'. (p. 351) Everything that the heroine does it is for her own freedom. However, Jane perceives 'freedom' in a rather unique way and personalizes the term. Jane's life may

be divided into three stages: Gateshead, Lowood, and Thornfield. These, according to Hagan should be seen as prison-like places that Jane had to escape from. Each of these 'prisons' imposed a role on Jane. Had she accepted her role, she would not have achieved her ultimate goal: her freedom! The first time when Jane shows aspirations for freedom was in Chapter 2, in the well-known 'Red Room'. The room is a quite authentic symbol of a prison. Jane was locked there by her aunt to teach her a lesson. 'You will now stay here an hour longer, and it is only on condition of perfect submission and stillness that I shall liberate you then' (Bronte, 2003, p.16). As it has been already exemplified, Jane didn't obey her aunt's rules and as she left Gateshead the reader has enough proof that she was a rebellious child. Later on, Jane did 'liberate' herself through submission when she decided to get married. Another prison-like place that Jane lived in, was Lowood Orphanage. The garden was 'surrounded' by 'high and spike-guarded walls' which 'exclude every glimpse of prospect' (p.54,88). Even the image of the school was sinister and did not inspire any hopes for Jane. Eventually, due to her meeting kind and generous persons, that 'prison' became a house for Jane. It was there that she grew up and transformed into a Lady. Jane escapes from Lowood by finding a job and moving to Thornfield. It was a different place and probably one of the most pleasant. It was there that Jane became financially independent due to a constant, respected job, fair working condition and fell in love. Surprisingly, Thornfield turned out to be a prison as well. She could not fully achieve her freedom because the person whom she loved was not free himself. It was at that certain moment in the novel when Jane decided to leave Thornfield behind saying: '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.' In Hagan's opinion (Hagan, 1971) Jane's decision to leave 'is not only a liberal act, but a metaphor of the liberation of her 'spirit' from the 'house' of her body, which occurred at the moment she decided to serve and sacrifice herself for the will of the creator rather than that of His creature.' Marrying Rochester at that moment would mean to break the law of God because he was legally married and his wife was alive. After the incident at Thornfield in which Rochester's wife dies and he is injured, Jane comes back and marries him. It was a reunion of righteousness and love. Finally, after going through so many storms, Jane found her freedom.

In conclusion, the present study identified evidence to prove that Jane indeed had the so-called 'New Woman' character traits. She did not follow the conventions and rules of the society. Jane proved to be rebellious and non-conforming from the very beginning by not letting anybody to offend her because of her status, appearance or choices. She was aware of her potential and always aspired to learn more and educate herself. Jane understood the importance of being independent in terms of self-ownership and financially as well, though money did not matter much for her. The ultimate goal that Jane achieves is her individual freedom. A quote by Albert Camus explains somehow why Jane needed and aspired to liberation: 'The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion.' Everything about Jane's decisions was about standing up and asking for freedom. Liberty gave the right to Jane to spread her

wings and be herself no matter what. I consider the topic of feminism relevant and important for our society as we have to understand that gender should never be an obstacle in achieving our dreams. Women have the same potential as men do, everything lies in our perseverance and determination. As Jane proves, sometimes it is better to swim against the flood in order to accomplish something greater. “I remembered that the real world was wide, and that a varied field of hopes and fears, of sensations and excitements, awaited those who had the courage to go forth into its expanse, to seek real knowledge of life amidst its perils” (Bronte, 2003, p. 168).

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