

On the Representations of Parent-Child Relationships in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë

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Abstract

The paper aims at analysing the parent-child relationships in Charlotte Brontë's novel Jane Eyre, with special emphasis on the relationship between Jane Eyre, the protagonist of the novel, and her aunt, Mrs. Reed. For this purpose, it begins by presenting the traits of the domestic Victorian ideal as well as those of the so-called "transnormative family", to ultimately show that the Victorian domestic ideal was not valid for everyone, which had a great impact on both parents and children in the process of upbringing. Then, the paper considers the representations of Victorian domestic relationships in Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, which the author of the novel uses to demonstrate that a strong character and an iron will, like those of the protagonist, can make a difference and change destinies.

Key words: Victorian domestic ideology; novel as genre; representation

Family is considered to be the basic cell of society, having a great impact on its welfare. Naturally therefore, family is influenced by different events that a nation goes through to such an extent that even the relationships within it change. So, the domestic ideal varies from one historical period to another. As members of the society, writers describe it more or less realistically. It happens very often that literary works reveal the peculiarities of the period in which they were written, as is indeed the case of Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*. Special emphasis is placed in this paper on the link between the protagonist, Jane Eyre, and her aunt, as a representation of the way orphans could be treated by their stepparents at the time and of the impact of the education that the latter performed on the children's life and on society in general.

For the purpose of better understanding how Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* mirrors certain aspects of life in the Victorian society, the issue of the literary genre that it belongs to needs to be taken into consideration. As Timothy Roberts suggests, "*Jane Eyre*, along with Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, is one of the most famous romance novels of all time" (2011: 8)

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and has many traits characteristic of the Gothic novel. Roberts also maintains that it is a bildungsroman narrative and a moral allegory (2011: 9-11). In relation to this, Debra Teachman declares that:

Jane Eyre takes the form of both a fictional autobiography and a bildungsroman. As an autobiography, it presents the story of Jane's life from her own adult perspective and in her own words. As a bildungsroman, it is the story of the education of an individual, both through formal education and by growing into maturity (2001: 2).

It seems that the author sought to mingle these two genres in order to authentically represent the problems that the Victorian society encountered, especially those connected with the condition of female children. Teachman addresses the issue in the following lines:

Most bildungsromans of the nineteenth century and before were written about men, but *Jane Eyre* is the story of a woman's education into life. The novel focuses the reader's attention primarily on those experiences, academic and otherwise, from which Jane learns the most about herself and the world she lives in. It displays the process of her growth in knowledge and wisdom as she experiences life (2001: 2).

The protagonist 'learns about herself and the world she lives in' even from her childhood, when she lives in her aunt's house. This period marks the beginning of the desire to be independent and not to be at someone else's mercy while, at the same time, it offers Brontë the perfect opening for her story of personal becoming. Interweaving features pertaining to literary genres associated with the realistic mode of writing, *Jane Eyre* remains structurally coherent and persuasively verisimilar, serving as a documentary source that sheds light on the society of the period and on its values, thus carrying a moralizing value.

If one were to consider Bloom's affirmation according to which "the narrative is related in the first person by Jane Eyre herself, who is very much an overt surrogate for Charlotte Brontë" (2004: 19), as well as Cecil's remarks on the writer's protagonists, who "are all the same person; and that is Charlotte Brontë" (1935: 122), then one has the right to say that Mrs. Reed is the prototype of Aunt Branwell, "a strict and forbidding woman" who was invited by Patrick Brontë "to help care for his orphaned family" and who "lived with the Brontës until her death" (Gilbert, Gubar 1985: 347). Of course, on the road from life to fiction, several modifications regarding childhood have been operated: for

instance, Jane Eyre had lost both parents, not only one; Elizabeth Branwell lived with the Brontës and not vice-versa; Charlotte was not mistreated by anyone in comparison with Jane, who was abused by her cousin. But what should be pointed out is that Charlotte Brontë's work represents the Victorian 'transnormative' family and the way adopted children were treated within such families. Elizabeth Thiel pertinently explains the term:

'transnormative family' identifies those family units headed by single parents, step-parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings or the state that exists in opposition to the 'natural' and 'complete' family of husband, wife and children. These are not merely extended family units. They may incorporate kin, but the transnormative family is identified primarily by the temporary or permanent absence of a natural parent or parents, often by the presence of a surrogate mother or father, who may or may not be related to the child, and, frequently, by the relocation of the child to an environment outside the 'natural' family home (2008: 8).

Referring to the Victorian period, Thiel maintains that: "the nineteenth-century transnormative family was deviant in that it challenged the verisimilitude of the domestic ideal by depicting paradigms of family that existed beyond the desirable norm" (2008: 8). As for the ideal family of the time, it has been described along the following lines:

Fathers were the heads of their homes, providing financially and acting as the ultimate authorities. Mothers tended to the emotional and physical needs of the family and sacrificed their own desires for others' well-being. Victorians particularly revered motherhood as ennobling and stressed the importance of women's close relationships with children, but fathers also took an active interest in their offspring. Children, on the other hand, were dutiful, obedient, and thankful for their parents' support and care. In short, all worked together toward a harmonious, sanctified home life (Nelson 2007 cited in Frost 2009: 11).

In fact, a peaceful atmosphere within the family was desirable at all times. However, this often remained only a dream. Even during the nineteenth century, when a strong accent was laid on family issues, a harmonious home life could not be throughout attained. In this respect, Claudia Nelson states that:

[t]his ideal, obviously, was possible only for the middle and upper classes, as poor mothers and fathers had limited time and resources.

Domesticity, though, was a goal towards which many families worked, and it powerfully influenced children in their assessments of their own childhoods (cited in Frost 2009: 11).

This sense of domesticity crossed class frontiers, being symptomatic of an entire society and way of life, making John Ruskin, among others, remark that, in the end, the true home for Victorians was

a place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home; so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home; it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted fire in. But so far as it is a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods, before whose faces none may come but those whom they can receive with love ... (1888 cited in Lane 2009: 2).

Ruskin's ideas are complemented by contemporary views which rewrite the Victorian not-so-distant-past and its theorizations. Eva Lane, for instance, believes that an ideal family consists of three elements: father, mother, children – who are in harmony with one another. Commenting upon Ruskin's evaluation of a harmonious home, she explains that the term 'division'

implies that any disruption of this harmony or any fragmenting of the whole would prove disastrous for the sanctity of the home. Each family member contributes something crucial to the home which seemingly cannot be contributed by any substitute. Thus, the home cannot exist without all its required members (2009: 4).

The representation of division is, after all, essential in exposing the flaws of the actual, imperfect family striving to attain the specificities of the ideal construct imposed. On the other hand, in literature, not only does division break and remake family networks, avenging the norm and the imposition, but it spices up the narrative and plays with the reader's expectations, allowing a welcome, though imagined, freedom and advancing substantial food for thought.

The contradictions and tensions that exist within this construction have been thoroughly explored and illustrated to great effect by critics such as Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff, Elizabeth Langland, Karen Chase

and Michael Levenson. Their studies, and the field of Victorian domestic criticism more broadly, have demonstrated that Victorian domestic ideology was filled with contradiction and paradox. These contradictions and paradoxes are visible in Victorian fiction which was frequently concerned with the ways in which the family was troubled, broken, or burdened by loss and conflict (Lane 2009: 4).

Returning to the realities of the time which the literary text remains contaminated by when not deliberately attempting to mirror and pass judgments on them, their darker side (in connection with children and childhood) has then, as now, been placed under the spotlight. Ginger S. Frost mentions that, due to the short life expectancy specific to this period, a lot of children were orphans or half orphans and many of them “grew up with stepparents and often stepbrothers and sisters as well” (2009: 20). She also claims that, because the Victorians had many blended families, “stories of wicked stepparents abound in Victorian literature” (Frost 2009: 20-21). Claudia Nelson maintains the same thing: “Narratives about children raised by family members other than their parents are particularly common in Victorian literature” (2007: 164). A case in point is, of course, the novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, whose protagonist is an orphan raised, from early infancy, by her uncle’s wife:

After my mother and father had been married a year, the latter caught the typhus fever while visiting among the poor of a large manufacturing town where his curacy was situated, and where that disease was then prevalent: that my mother took the infection from him, and both died within a month of each other (Brontë 2003: 43).

I could not remember him; but I knew that he was my own uncle—my mother’s brother—that he had taken me when a parentless infant to his house; and that in his last moments he had required a promise of Mrs. Reed that she would rear and maintain me as one of her own children (30).

Despite her promise, Mrs. Reed does not consider Jane equal to her own children, John, Eliza and Georgiana, who do not represent the Victorian ideal, as suggested by the subsequent description:

Eliza, who was headstrong and selfish, was respected. Georgiana, who had a spoiled temper, a very acrid spite, a captious and insolent carriage, was universally indulged. Her beauty, her pink cheeks and golden curls, seemed to give delight to all who looked at her, and to purchase indemnity for every fault. John no one thwarted, much less punished;

though he twisted the necks of the pigeons, killed the little pea-chicks, set the dogs at the sheep, stripped the hothouse vines of their fruit, and broke the buds off the choicest plants in the conservatory: he called his mother "old girl," too; sometimes reviled her for her dark skin, similar to his own; bluntly disregarded her wishes; not unfrequently tore and spoiled her silk attire; and he was still "her own darling." I dared commit no fault: I strove to fulfil every duty; and I was termed naughty and tiresome, sullen and sneaking, from morning to noon, and from noon to night (28).

There are a lot of passages in the novel that describe the way Jane is treated by her aunt, her cousins and the other people living in that house. Here are some of them:

John had not much affection for his mother and sisters, and an antipathy to me. He bullied and punished me; not two or three times in the week, nor once or twice in the day, but continually: every nerve I had feared him, and every morsel of flesh in my bones shrank when he came near. There were moments when I was bewildered by the terror he inspired, because I had no appeal whatever against either his menaces or his inflictions; the servants did not like to offend their young master by taking my part against him, and Mrs. Reed was blind and deaf on the subject: she never saw him strike or heard him abuse me, though he did both now and then in her very presence, more frequently, however, behind her back. [...] for, all at once, without speaking, he struck suddenly and strongly. I tottered, and on regaining my equilibrium retired back a step or two from his chair. [...] He ran headlong at me: I felt him grasp my hair and my shoulder: he had closed with a desperate thing. I really saw in him a tyrant, a murderer. I felt a drop or two of blood from my head trickle down my neck, and was sensible of somewhat pungent suffering: these sensations for the time predominated over fear, and I received him in frantic sort. I don't very well know what I did with my hands, but he called me "Rat! Rat!" and bellowed out aloud (21-23).

Memorable words are used by the author to describe Jane's feelings towards John. His awful behaviour is encouraged by his mother's indifference. Mrs. Reed is not only indifferent to the relationships between her children and Jane, but she is guilty of them. As a mother, she ought to have taught her children to respect Jane and to treat her as equal to them, not to see her as dependent on their family and without any rights, because she had no money. As John puts it,

you have no business to take our books; you are a dependant, mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg,

and not to live here with gentlemen's children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mama's expense... (22).

The servants have the same attitude. Miss Abbot, for example, addresses Jane the following words:

And you ought not to think yourself on an equality with the Misses Reed and Master Reed, because Missis 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. (25).

As resulting from the excerpts above, money was an important factor in one's life. So, if one had money, (s)he would be respected; and if one had no money, (s)he would be disregarded even by his/her own kin. This was characteristic of the Victorian society in general. In *Dickens, Money, and Society*, Grahame Smith shows that "in the nineteenth century money became one of the prime movers of the human life" (1968: 67).

Therefore, one of the reasons to mistreat Jane was her lack of money. Being a little child, Jane could not understand all these things and, as a result, she was always tormented by a series of questions:

All John Reed's violent tyrannies, all his sisters' proud indifference, all his mother's aversion, all the servants' partiality, turned up in my disturbed mind like a dark deposit in a turbid well. Why was I always suffering, always browbeaten, always accused, for ever condemned? Why could I never please? Why was it useless to try to win any one's favour? (Brontë 2003: 28).

However, she found an explanation for this unfair treatment:

...but how could she really like an interloper not of her race, and unconnected with her, after her husband's death, by any tie? It must have been most irksome to find herself bound by a hard-wrung pledge to stand in the stead of a parent to a strange child she could not love, and to see an uncongenial alien permanently intruded on her own family group (30).

But this explanation was incomplete. If Jane had had money, she would have been respected as her cousins were or maybe even more.

The lack of any attempt on the part of Mrs. Reed to educate her children had a disastrous impact both on Mrs. Reed, as a mother, and on her children. First of all, John died untimely:

... he ruined his health and his estate amongst the worst men and the worst women. He got into debt and into jail: his mother helped him out twice, but as soon as he was free he returned to his old companions and habits. His head was not strong: the knaves he lived amongst fooled him beyond anything I ever heard. [...] and the next news was that he was dead. How he died, God knows! – they say he killed himself (317).

Of course, one may say that Mrs. Reed is not guilty of what John chose to do in life. It is true that she is not responsible for her son's deeds, but she contributes to his demise by her indifference to education. She allows John total freedom during childhood and this is a great mistake. He does not learn to master his own body and mind and, as a result, he dies very young.

Then, Mrs. Reed "had been out of health herself for some time: she had got very stout, but was not strong with it; and the loss of money and fear of poverty were quite breaking her down. The information about Mr. John's death and the manner of it came too suddenly: it brought on a stroke" (317-318). Her daughters are not interested in their sick mother and even the servants perform only the minimal tasks. After Mrs. Reed confesses to Jane that she regrets the way she treated her, she dies; "neither of" her children "had dropped a tear" (344). Consequently, this woman is described as having two problems that cost her life: money and education. Referring to the first of them, as seen from the above, the narrator displays the negative impact of money on Mrs. Reed's destiny and stresses its destructive power. But regarding education, a too permissive parent is thought to destroy himself/herself and his/her children. In this respect, Ellen G. White, a writer that lived in the late Victorian period, maintained that: "children will be happier, far happier, under proper discipline than if left to do as their untrained impulses suggest" (1954: 79).

Fortunately, this faulty education does not destroy the protagonist's life, too. Despite the harsh treatment, Jane finds the power and the courage to overcome injustice. Thus, she develops a strong character and, following her desire to be independent, she manages to obtain what she wants. This is the reason why the novel in focus here is considered to be one of the finest feminist works. Many Victorian writers sought to change the woman's role in society, to equal her rights to those of man. This discrimination affected children as well, allowing boys to have more options than girls (Frost 2009: 7). So, it was important for Charlotte Brontë to show the way Jane Eyre faces various hardships even in this early period of her life in order to raise the readers' awareness and to call for reform.

In short, it might be said that the overall message of *Jane Eyre* is that not everyone could attain the domestic Victorian norms. There were a lot of families that encountered problems. Most of them were the result of the fact that the Victorian society had false values, such as affluence and pride. People were double-faced. While they appreciated peace and harmony within their families, class and gender were still very significant to them, disregarding the poor and neglecting the woman's importance. Criticizing these things, Charlotte Brontë seems to make an appeal to the Victorian society to change the situation and, by means of the protagonist, Jane Eyre, she demonstrated that it was possible.

Indeed, literature has a great power upon the reader. Knowing that "the end of writing is to instruct", as Samuel Johnson stated in his *Preface to Shakespeare* (2008: 9), the writers used this 'tool' over the course of time to manipulate the masses. In this context, the Victorian literature had the purpose to make people aware of the existing problems and to prompt them to take a stand. The realistic novel then, by faithfully representing society, facilitates understanding and urges each reader to change the present for a better future. By means of its heroes, this type of literature assured people that there was no destiny except the one they created.

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