

Brontes' Heroines: Inner Behavior and Social Transformations in a Global Nineteenth-Century Context and Beyond

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Abstract:

This paper explores the inner behavior and social psychological transformation of Charlotte and Anne Brontë's heroines, situating them within the broader context of nineteenth-century British society and the global cultural framework. While much of the existing scholarship focuses on the immediate Victorian setting and the internal struggles of Brontë's characters, this study addresses a significant gap in the literature by connecting these narratives to more social and global themes. Through an in-depth qualitative analysis of Brontë's major works, such as *Villette*, *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, this paper investigates how the experiences of Brontë's heroines—characterized by their defiance of social norms and struggles for self-autonomy are shaped by the larger cultural forces of the time. Employing an interdisciplinary approach that combines literary criticism, social history, and cultural studies, the study shows how Brontë's works are still relevant today and also it enhances our knowledge of their works. The study argues that despite having strong historical roots, Brontë's heroines provide insightful perspectives on global human experience that go beyond historical context to address contemporary issues.

Keywords: Bronte's Heroines, inner behavior, social transformation, individualism, resistance to oppression, intellect.

بطلات الاخوات برونتي: السلوك الداخلي والتحول الاجتماعي في سياق عالمي للقرن التاسع عشر وما بعده

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المخلص:

تقوم هذه الدراسة باستكشاف السلوك الداخلي والتحول النفسي الاجتماعي لبطلتي شارلوت وأنا برونتي، وتضعهما في السياق الأوسع للمجتمع البريطاني في القرن التاسع عشر والإطار الثقافي العالمي. وفي حين تركز أغلب الدراسات القائمة على البيئة الفيكترية المباشرة والصراعات الداخلية لشخصيات برونتي، فإن هذه الدراسة تعالج فجوة كبيرة في الأدب من خلال ربط هذه السرديات بموضوعات أكثر اجتماعية وعالمية. من خلال تحليل نوعي متعمق للأعمال الرئيسية لبرونتي، مثل *فيليت وجين إير*

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مجلة آداب الكوفة - جامعة الكوفة مرخصة بموجب ترخيص المشاع الإبداعي ٤.٠ الدولي.



ومستأجر قاعة وإيلدليل، يستكشف هذا البحث كيف أن تجارب بطلات برونتي – اللاتي يتميزن بتحديهن للمعايير الاجتماعية، والنضال من أجل تحرير الذات تتشكل من قبل القوى الثقافية الأكبر في ذلك الوقت. باستخدام نهج متعدد التخصصات يجمع بين النقد الأدبي والتاريخ الاجتماعي والدراسات الثقافية، تُظهر الدراسة كيف أن أعمال برونتي لاتزال ذات صلة اليوم كما أنها تعزز معرفتنا بأعمالها. أخيرًا، تفترض الدراسة أنه على الرغم من جذورهم التاريخية القوية، فإن بطلات برونتي يقدمن وجهات نظر ثاقبة حول التجربة الإنسانية العالمية تتجاوز السياق التاريخي لمعالجة القضايا المعاصرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: بطلات برونتي، السلوك الداخلي، التحول الاجتماعي، الفردية، مقاومة القمع، الفكر.

“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 constraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags.”¹ (Bronte (1847),2008, p. 109)

Introduction

The Bronte sisters were like most working women in England; they were also restricted to domestic service roles. Their works are considered a part of nineteenth century canon. Victorian women's typical jobs were in service, and Bronte's works are full of characters who are either servants themselves or are treated as such. The core of the Bronte sisters' feminist perspective is, in fact, the realization that all women, regardless of social status, are servants (Zlotnick, 2014). In a literary tradition that was previously dominated by men, authors like Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters created niches for female viewpoints that profoundly altered the structure of English literature. These writers not only helped the novel flourish as a literary form, but also utilized it as a forum to question societal norms and express the mental and emotional lives of women. Their writings demonstrate a change in literary direction, away from stories that are concentrated on men and toward a more inclusive representation of the human condition. They demonstrated that women could redefine and control the literary tradition in addition to

participating in it. Their impact on contemporary writers and readers is enduring, securing the novel's position as a potent medium for both societal critique and individual expression.

Novels as a literary form reached their peak during the Victorian era. Maybe for this reason, novel writing was employed by the Victorians for a variety of purposes. Many found financial success in writing novels, and for individuals from all walks of life, reading novels was the main source of enjoyment. It is still a source of fame that the Victorians were avid readers of novels. Victorian novels were also thought to be a means of managing and disciplining a population of voracious readers, as well as a reflection of societal issues (Çelik, 2016).

The Bronte sisters—Charlotte, Emily, and Anne—lead novel toward a more intensely emotional conclusion. Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) delves into darker themes of desire, loneliness, and the human psyche, while Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) questioned traditional ideas of gender and class. Newbold (2024) has said "Charlotte Bronte's heroines often desire invisibility and certainly a place in which to seek refuge" (194). Their works were distinguished by their multifaceted heroines who broke free from the confines of conventional Victorian morality and resisted the restrictions placed on women in both literature and society. Wilkes states, "Charlotte Bronte's novels grab readers from the outset with their compelling narratives, expressed in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* through passionate and independent female narrators, and probe their characters' inner lives" (2010: 2).

In *Villette*, Lucy Snowe struggles to maintain her independence from external definitions and ideals of herself while yet yearning for masculine validation. Every time she meets a male, or members of the patriarchal society as a whole, she is forced to give up her quest for independence and a self-defined identity. As it happened in the story, Lucy Snowe is a lady without society for the majority of her life. It appears that Charlotte Bronte purposefully gave her the position of an orphan to emphasize the psychological struggle this lady faces in a society that is so disconnected from the true growth of the feminine self. The setting for Lucy Snowe's

solo journey was one in which Charlotte Bronte's alter ego existed (Kavaler-Adler, 1990, 38). In her novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne Bronte gave voice to Helen, the heroine who endured restrictive, authoritarian rules imposed by a patriarchal nineteenth-century society. Helen went on to become a feminist voice and an advocate for them through an educational and productive approach based on the facts (Ríos, 2021,47).

Charlotte Bronte manages to create her masterpieces and some of the most well-known literary characters in spite of all the criticism directed at women's writing and reality in Victorian society. The female characters in Charlotte Bronte's novels, Lucy Snowe and Jane Eyre, are frank, autonomous travelers, gainful workers, and self-assured (Mutlu, 2023). Jane Eyre, Lucy Snowe and Helen are presented as open, independent people who aren't scared to express their opinions or demand what they want. The conventional restriction of women to the private realm is challenged by their status as tourists and productive workers, which positions them as engaged members of both their local communities and the larger social landscape. Charlotte Bronte's heroines struggle to define who they are and what they stand for. Their ideas and language do not reflect the ideals held by Victorian society. Moreover, their actions were seen as immoral. These feminine characters speak with a great deal of confidence. When they are mistreated, they are able to fiercely defend themselves (Shuttleworth, 1996, p. 71).

The Bronte's heroines are self-assured because of their deep intelligence and moral compass. They face both personal and societal obstacles head-on with unshakable determination. As they attempt to balance their needs for freedom, love, and purpose, their adventures are not just physical but also psychological. Because of their intricacy, they are enduring and approachable characters that appeal to readers of all ages.

Analysis

Concentrating on Charlotte and Anne Bronte's heroines, Jane Eyre in *Jane Eyre*, Lucy Snowe in *Villette* and Hellen in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, as female characters who overcome social constraints and personal hardships, Bronte illuminates a type of resilience that is sometimes disregarded—the capacity to persevere in silence and preserve one's identity in the face of tremendous outside pressures. Their calm, unwavering determination to live and maintain their inner individuality is what gives them this strength rather than overt resistance. As Kavalier states, “Charlotte Bronte is making an important point here by showing us that a female who is forced into emotional suppression by circumstance has a very special kind of strength in the capacity to endure—a strength to contain and hold a restricted self in abeyance” (1990, 39). By depicting women who are compelled to repress their emotions, Charlotte Bronte demonstrates her sophisticated comprehension of inner fortitude and perseverance.

The limitations imposed on women throughout the Victorian era, when social conventions mandated decency, modesty, and emotional control, are reflected in this perseverance. According to Mutlu, E. (2023), “the conventional Victorian society dictates to women what they should do and they are repressed by a patriarchal system. It is also this patriarchal force that attracts Charlotte Bronte to write under a male name, Currer Bell.”. This conflict between the strict standards of their environment and their rich inner lives is embodied by Bronte's' heroines. Concentrating on selfhood and dignity is a theme embodied by Helen, Jane Eyre and Lucy Snow in a world full of social disparities.

Heroines' Intellect and Individuality

Bronte's' heroines' good taste highlights their uniqueness and intelligence. Rather than following the latest social trends, their perception of art, literature, and culture is shaped by their own moral compass and judgment. Women use this sense of taste as a means of expressing their identities and ideas in a culture that often seeks to stifle

or homogenize their voices. As Garson said, “for whatever else they represent, Bronte’s heroines always personify Good Taste: good taste in clothing, in food, in interior decor, in reading, in painting, in writing, in art criticism—in whatever aesthetic area they enter” (qtd. in Heritage, 2014, 27).

The heroines such as Jane Eyre, Lucy Snowe, and others exhibit a strong sense of taste and discernment in a range of disciplines, such as clothing, food, house design, and art. They prioritize functionality, elegance, and simplicity over ostentation or excess. Jane Eyre, for example, demonstrates her modest status, honesty, and self-respect with her simple yet lovely clothing. In *Villette*, Lucy Snowe's nuanced preferences also reveal a depth of character and a gentle dignity. Newbold argued, “Lucy Snowe, a teacher in a girl’s school in the foreign city of Villette, is forced to examine her own emotional boundaries as she begins her long recovery from the initial cultural shock of being a stranger living in a busy commercial space of Madame Beck’s school” (2024, 193). Miller (2001) said “a positive concept of the emerging female self in a society whose predominant models of middle-class femininity were self-denying, dutiful, and passion-free.” (18) The Bronte sisters' protagonists carefully considered—and frequently rejected—the norms, values, and constraints of their world, which made them contributions to the drive for individuality. From her early years, Jane Eyre worked to combat oppression. She resists injustice at the hands of Edward Rochester, her heartless aunt, and St. John Rivers. Throughout, her story revolves around her unique understanding of her moral obligations, even when doing so comes at a significant personal cost.

The heroines in the sisters’ works exhibit a higher potential for personal growth. Their morals, intelligence, and features are profoundly expressed through good taste, which is not just a social virtue. Their acute senses allow them to traverse their surroundings with dignity and integrity, surpassing social norms and snap judgments. Jane Eyre's admiration for straightforward yet meaningful art reveals her genuineness and depth of feeling, and her rejection of luxury is in line with her

disdain for facade and shallowness. The heroine, Jane, has an authority due to her position and plainness. In the story, her subjectivity is based on the paradoxical internal potential that is indicated by her uneven characteristics. Jane's subjectivity is aided by her plainness, which lends itself more to specific description than beauty (Arvan, 2004, p. 64).

Lucy is considered modern since women are still affected by her circumstances. Although it is undoubtedly simpler for women to be self-sufficient now, Lucy's difficulties are not unique to the Victorian era. Women still face prejudice and preconceptions, despite significant advances in their circumstances since Bronte's day. So, since society does not accept Lucy for who she truly is, she turns inward and learns the feminine art of self-suppression in order to cope with the fact that she cannot be what society wants her to be. Her sense of self does not fit the socially constructed stereotypes, therefore none of Lucy's tactics give her roles that she can truly embrace (Sandal, 2019: 33).

Anne Bronte portrays female characters who are emotionally resilient and capable of using their skills to secure employment, ultimately achieving self-sufficiency, individuality, and professional identity. Unlike traditional portrayals, her heroines do not seek to attract a husband. While both of her novels conclude with happy marriages, these unions are based on the heroines' deliberate choices, founded on genuine love and shared values, as well as intellectual compatibility with their partners (Foster, 2012).

Helen demonstrates her individualism by refusing to stay in a controlling marriage and by disobeying social expectations. Her daring act of autonomy in leaving her violent husband, Arthur Huntingdon, goes against Victorian notions of female subservience and marital stability. A unique decision for women in her era, Helen's decision to make a profession from her artistic abilities further emphasizes her independence. Her rationality and ability to voice her opinions contradict the angel in the house theory, yet her ability to do so with vigor and conviction contradicts the Victorian ideal of femininity as well as (Lupold, 2008:4).

Both men and women in the nineteenth century firmly believed in the concepts of womanliness and the expected standards of conduct and decorum. Women were discouraged from pursuing creative endeavors that could contradict their role in the home or pursuing professions (like writing) that could interfere with their ability to carry out their assigned responsibilities and change the modest, obedient "angel" of the home into an assertive, ambitious "monster." Restricted to the house, women were frequently not the owners of the space and were therefore assigned to the role of housekeeper rather than householder, which is primarily held by men (Heyns 1999: 23). Bronte's consideration of emotional repression as a source of strength highlights her progressive view of female individuality and resilience, establishing her writing as a potent critique of the opportunities and constraints facing women in her era. Individuality, artistic autonomy, and intellectual depth are all interwoven in Helen's persona, which makes her a potent symbol of a woman who defies limitations and silence. Through Helen, Anne Bronte celebrates the potential for female emancipation and self-expression while providing a profound critique of Victorian social conventions.

Heroin's self-sufficiency

Undoubtedly, the Bronte sisters were fundamentally feminist authors who defied the norms of their era. In their novels, strong, independent women fight to find fulfillment in a society that blindly assigns them a submissive role and severely limits their social and intellectual possibilities. The sisters were shocked to learn that their honest and potent portrayals of emotional pain were viewed as "coarse" and that their heroines were viewed as disobedient and unfeminine (Hulmes, 1990: 102). The story of Jane Eyre is a powerful one about equality and self-respect. Through her difficult childhood and her tumultuous relationship with Mr. Rochester, Jane demonstrates her worth as a person. Despite the temptation of romantic fulfillment, she is unwilling to compromise her autonomy or her values. The narrator and heroine of Jane Eyre are a new breed, one that is well-educated, adept at manipulating words and

images, and who purposefully paints a realistic yet simple picture of herself in order to provide a credible and respectable romance (Heritage, 42).

Jan's statement, "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will"(ch. Xxiii) perfectly captures her desire for moral and emotional autonomy. It captures Jane's independence, but beneath her tough appearance, she is a young lady yearning for a family and love. Although Jane gains self-reliance throughout the story, her desire for a family is equally evident. By overcoming hardship, Jane defies Victorian gender norms and eventually establishes a partnership founded on equality and respect for one another.

Bronte's heroines have a tendency of being autonomous and independent despite the masculinity of their time. In addition to indicating personalized thought, subjectivity indicates individualized thought made possible by women's perception of themselves as active participants and the architects of their own spiritual identities. In Charlotte Bronte's *Villette*, Lucy Snowe exploited her subjectivity to make sense of her perplexing visions of a ghostly nun. Her visual rhetoric is the most reliable way for us to understand her innermost thoughts. She is a very contemplative and modern heroine that her path is more about internal reconciliation than external victory. However, this subjectivity is also modeled by Helen Graham, the heroine in Anne Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. She continues to uphold her quiet virtue despite being misunderstood and shunned by her community when her marriage failed and she became a single mother. In addition to using her creative vision when painting, which she appears to find therapeutic, she uses it to candidly depict the spectacle of drunken violence (Scott, 2016, p.6).

While Jane's journey culminates in emotional and relational fulfillment, Lucy's story finishes in an unclear manner, highlighting her resoluteness and persistent loneliness. Brontës' variety in examining the various facets of female autonomy and survival under the confines of Victorian society is highlighted by these distinctions. Jane and Helen are

self-sufficient and capable of opposing the repressive culture without worrying about losing anything in the process. Despite their love for someone, Helen and Jane's intellect, body, and soul are not entirely bonded to one person, as demonstrated by Corinne. As Lin (2002) argued, "Helen Huntingdon's resistance to Arthur's domination undermines the Victorian gender hierarchy in which women are defined as the object of male control". Both Jane and Helen distance themselves from their loved ones when a moral dilemma arises (Shahid, 2017: 4).

Results and Discussion

The female characters created by Victorian authors Charlotte Bronte, and Anne Bronte were given a platform to defy social expectations through their writing, speech, and behavior. Despite the fact that all three resistance tactics are subversive to varied degrees, the female protagonists' autobiographies and diaries prove to be the most effective way for them to secure and obtain freedom from social domination (Shahid, 2017: 2). As a result, the individual problems of Jane, Lucy and Helen are impacted by the larger national and worldwide trends of the era in addition to reflecting the local cultural context. By bridging the gap between the local and the global, Bronte's work may be better understood and its significance to current debates about independence, individualism, and defiance of social conventions is highlighted. The study contends that although Bronte's heroines are steeped in their historical era, they provide insights into universal human experiences that go beyond their setting, making them relevant to current global challenges.

The Bronte sisters lived in a time when it was assumed that women would marry, have angelic homes, and become ideal ladies in their communities and society. They made great use of their penmanship skills to enter the professional commitment that came with authoring, although not being active participants in the feminist argument. Women were allowed to work in the writing profession as long as their stories and subjects supported the philosophy of the distinct spheres and the

preservation of the Victorian ideal of femininity (Ríos,2021, 18). Jordan (2003) argued, “Charlotte Bronte could preserve a space for the female self-empowered by the Romantic ideal of creative privacy while projecting a male persona that could be both culturally valorized and ironized.”

Newbold Alison (2024) argued, “the female protagonist of *Villette* carefully crafts a self-image fit for the social environment in which she finds herself.” The majority of readers of Victorian literature gain an awareness of gender relations and nineteenth-century feminism through Jane Eyre, the heroine of Charlotte Bronte, who is one of the movement's most forceful, forthright, and confronting voices (Schor 2005). As Tabosa-Vaz (2005) said, “rereading the novels of Charlotte Bronte serves to uncover the influence of her nineteenth-century milieu and the link between the condition of women in society and her fiction”. Tredennick (2016) once said, “the Victorian period was a time of profound changes in culture, economy, politics and technology”(2).

Therefore, the Victorian novel's obsession with secrets and revelation revealed a knowledge of the mutual ignorance at the core of social connections rather than a conviction in the ultimate importance of discovering the truth. Victorians learned how to take ignorance and turn it into power through literature (Romanow, 2022).

Anne Brontë is well conscious of the patriarchal restrictions imposed on women, and she is bitterly opposed to both the unfairness and the restrictions. Her portrayal of numerous male characters in her novels as acting inappropriately or inadequately in certain situations serves as a vehicle for her rage. It is demonstrated that men are liars, harsh, frail, self-centered, and complacent. Her portrayal of men in an antagonistic manner highlights the depth of her animosity and supports her argument. But this does not imply that she uses hagiographic language to describe her female characters—rather, they are also shown as flawed and fallible people (Leave, 2013, 8).

The main characters in the novels written by the Bronte sisters are distinct from other people in their surroundings because they are not as

assimilated into their surroundings. The most well-known of them are Helen, a character created by Anne Bronte, who adopts a new name in order to conceal her identity and live as someone else, Jane and Lucy, the protagonists of Charlotte Bronte. As opposed to being about a woman's interior struggle and spiritual growth, *Jane Eyre* is seen as a political work. Charlotte's story, which dramatizes racial and colonial themes, was inspired by the societal movement toward a colonial policy. All other things being equal, their interpretations are unable to account for Victorian women's inevitable fate.

When it comes to marriage, *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* seem to be different from one another: Jane demands a happy marriage, whereas Lucy remains single for the remainder of her life. They do, however, share the trait that Lucy, the female character, ultimately seems to seize the lead by pushing Paul, the marginal male, to the sidelines. "Reader, I married him" in the last chapter of *Jane Eyre*, Jane, the main character, says it after she decides to marry Mr. Rochester after meeting him again. The phrase is important because it highlights Jane's agency and liberty in making the choice to marry Rochester rather than implying that she is being forcefully married off by him. It is a daring declaration of female independence at a time when social expectations frequently limited women's options, especially when it came to marriage. The happy marriage ending represents women's fate in Victorian society because it represents the inevitable fate of a woman who cannot exist in any situation—married or not—without making some kind of sacrifice. That selfless inclination of that time is also strikingly reflected in the works of *Wuthering Heights*' Catherine and Isabella and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*'s Helen, who lived as an illegal non-virgin by posing as a widow (Takahashi, 2023).

Conclusion

The present paper has examined the social and behavioral aspects of Charlotte Bronte's heroines in relation to British society in the nineteenth century and international transformative period. The study has shown how the struggles of characters like Jane Eyre, Helen and Lucy Snowe are not just local or personal but are intricately linked to the larger forces of cultural identity through an interdisciplinary approach that combines literary criticism, social history, and cultural studies. The study demonstrated that Bronte's themes transcend the Victorian age and provide insights into universal human experiences that are relevant to modern global challenges by placing her work within a global context. Though firmly grounded in their historical setting, Bronte's heroines appeal to contemporary audiences, demonstrating the work's ongoing importance in addressing issues of autonomy, individualism, resistance, and self-sufficiency in a world that is changing quickly.

This study not only broadens the understanding of the Bronte sisters' heroines by placing them in a global and interdisciplinary context, but it also highlights the importance of reexamining nineteenth-century literature from both historical and contemporary perspectives. Both Charlotte and Anne Bronte's heroines are renowned for their ability to look beyond their time and offer perceptive, contemporary interpretations of the complexities of the human condition. Thus, the heroines overcome social expectations and display extraordinary inner strength. Through *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, *Lucy Snowe* and *Jane Eyre*, the sisters not only created compelling stories, but openly challenged the social constraints placed on women throughout the Victorian era. Their characters have characteristics that are timeless as they challenge traditional notions of femininity and spark discussions about gender, identity, and independence. The sisters' works stand as a monument to the enduring power and strength of female's voice in literature.



¹ Bronte, in her novel *Jane Eyre* critiques the limitations placed on women by 19th-century society. In her contrast of men and women's abilities, she highlights the emotional and cognitive needs of women. Dispelling the popular belief that women should be content with limited domestic duties like "making puddings and knitting stockings," she argues that women also long for intellectual stimulation and the opportunity to work on important goals. Through her subtle but powerful criticism of the rigid gender standards of her time, she articulates a feminist perspective that is immensely relevant today.

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