

SERVING TWO MASTERS. OR THE DIALECTICS OF ROMANTIC VICTORIAN LITERATURE

Sandra MAGGIO*

Valter Henrique FRITSCH**

- **ABSTRACT:** The aim of this work is to investigate the strategies used by Charlotte Brontë, in the novel *Jane Eyre*, so as to solve the protagonist's dilemma of choosing between what she considers to be morally right, or to follow her intuition and her heart. This impasse is referred to, here, as the "Victorian Predicament," the clash between two conflicting aspects of Victorianism. On the one hand, there is the rigid code of morality, represented by the Evangelical Movement, proposing an ideal of respectability suitable for the new emerging middle classes. On the other hand, we have the influence of the Romantic Movement, which poses a new ethics and a new aesthetics. The idea suggested is that the use of symbolic imagery solves this difficulty of coping with the simultaneous commitments to morality and passion, and forges the style characterized by the use of poetic prose that is the mark of Brontë's writing.
- **KEYWORDS:** Charlotte Brontë. *Jane Eyre*. Victorianism. Victorian Literature. Evangelicalism.

"No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon."

(MATTHEW 6,24, *The Authorized King James Bible*, 2000)

We might as well start with two simple statements: *Jane Eyre* is a Romantic novel; and *Jane Eyre* is a Victorian novel. Straightforward as this may seem, these are nonetheless contradictory assertions, both formally and philosophically. A good way to deal with antithetical premises is by using a dialectical formula. Thesis: consider the Romantic ethos; Antithesis: consider the Victorian ethos. What might the Synthesis to such conflicting agendas be? This is the answer we pursue in this

* UFRGS – Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul. Instituto de Letras. Departamento de Línguas Modernas – Porto Alegre – Rio Grande do Sul – Brasil. 91540-000 – maggio@cpovo.net

** UFRGS – Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul. Instituto de Letras. PPG Letras – Doutorado em Literaturas Estrangeiras Modernas – Porto Alegre – Rio Grande do Sul – Brasil. 91540-000 – valter.fritsch@yahoo.com.br

work, as we examine Jane Eyre's and Charlotte Brontë's strategies to serve two demanding masters, Desire and Duty.

Thesis: *Jane Eyre* is a romantic construct

The major impediment to this assertion relates to terminology. If we refer to any standard textbook in the English tradition, we will see that the practice is to rank authors according to chronological patterns that can be presented either according to the centuries in which they lived (18th Century Literature, 19th Century Literature, etc.), or under the effigy of an important personality (The Age of Chaucer, The Age of Dryden, The Elizabethan Age). "Victorian Literature" is one of those labels, and it embraces every author published during the 64-year reign of Queen Alexandrina Victoria (1837 to 1901). *Jane Eyre*, published in 1847, is therefore a Victorian construct, not only according to this convention, but because it is altogether Victorian in spirit, in the sense that it reflects the socio-historical-cultural standards of that age. As for the expression "Romantic Literature", it coincides with the label chosen to designate the literary production of the 19th Century that precedes the ascension of Queen Victoria. This honour is understandably granted as a tribute to the great English Romantic poets Shelley, Byron, Keats, and their predecessors Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge. Despite that, the designation is problematic when we think of pre-Victorian prose productions. Because of the dates of their publications, the two British novelists usually ranked in anthologies as the great names in the Romantic Period (1800-1836) are Walter Scott and Jane Austen. The first remarkable thing about that fact is the omission of a third name, that of Mary Shelley, arguably the only great prose of the really romantic author of the period – if by the word "romantic" we imply the same characteristics we find in the art of Byron or Shelley. The two reasons for this omission are probably the facts that she writes Gothic literature – which at the time was not considered art – and that she lived so close to her companion Percy Bysshe Shelley that his aura made hers invisible. The reason why Sir Walter Scott's fiction is named Romantic is that his stories beckon to **Romance** in another meaning of the term, in the sense of chivalric literature, the historical or heroic narratives we have in the Arthurian legends, for instance. As to Jane Austen, she is probably labelled romantic because several elements – which will be, decades later, associated with the Romantic Movement – can already be identified in her novels. But Austen is, ultimately, a neoclassical author, a transitional author. This is easily seen if we consider the two sisters, Elinor and Marianne, in *Sense and sensibility*. No matter how lovely Marianne is, and admirable for her energy, the narrative point of view openly sides with Elinor, the practical, rational, well-balanced protagonist. In this sense, Austen is like Goethe – who, curiously, is ranked as Romantic in Brazil, and as Neoclassical in Germany.

This being said, our proposition here is that, technically contradictory as this statement may sound, *Jane Eyre* is concurrently a Romantic and a Victorian construct. In spite of being written after the official Romantic Period ranked in the chronology of English anthologies, the novel is romantic as it relates to the influence of the Romantic Poets (especially Byron); to the innovative use of poetic prose; to the wider space granted to the fantastic, to imagination, to the expression of feeling in its own right. Saying that the novels written by the Brontës cannot be called Romantic because they are Victorian – whereas Jane Austen’s must, because they are pre-Victorian – equals saying that Mr Darcy is more impassionate than Heathcliff, or that Elizabeth Bennet is more obsessive than Cathy Earnshaw. Consequently, we propose a new literary category to be considered for the sake of this essay, the Romantic Victorian novel.

In her classical Introduction to the 1966 Penguin Edition of *Jane Eyre*, Q. D. Leavis attributes to the three sisters the creation of a new, looser, more subjective, style of writing narrative prose,

Obviously, in those two-hourly walks that the Brontë sisters took every night round the parlour table, ‘like restless wild animals’, while they discussed their plans and projects, a revolutionary theory of what a novel should be and could do had been arrived at by the authors of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. We may guess that it was the experience of the poetry of the Romantics and Shakespearian tragedy that had enlarged for them the idea of the novelist’s function. [...] Charlotte and Emily were evidently united in their determination not to write novels which give merely a surface imitation of life (‘more real than true’) nor to be satisfied with studying people in their social and intellectual character. They aimed at achieving through prose fiction something as serious, vital and significant as the work of their favourite poets, which should voice the tragic experience of life, be true to the experience of the whole woman, and convey a sense of life’s springs and undercurrents. To envisage such a possibility for the novel was at that date a critical achievement of the first order; to succeed, however unequally, in carrying it out was surely proof of great creative genius. In order to be great art their novels, those girls realized, must include ‘poetry’, necessarily employing a poetic method and evolving new prose techniques. This effort in due course led to the novel’s becoming the major art form of the nineteenth century (LEAVIS, 1985, p. 11).

Although Charlotte Brontë’s novels have always been well received both by her contemporary critics and reading public, there were frequent complaints about the “indecorous intensity of feeling” (MARTINEAU, 1853). With the good intention of helping this new writer to improve her style, literary critic G. E. Lewes (1995) advised her to restrain the use of emotion and correct her shortcomings by studying Jane Austen’s novels. After reading *Pride and prejudice*, Brontë conclude that what she found there did not fit into her literary project. An interesting exchange

of letters followed, which can be seen as a relevant documentation of Brontë's romantic aesthetics.

Why do you like Miss Austen so very much? I am puzzled on that point. [...] I had not seen *Pride and Prejudice* till I read that sentence of yours, and then I got the book. And what did I find? An accurate, daguerreotyped portrait of a commonplace face! a carefully-fenced, highly cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers; but no glance of a bright physiognomy, no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck (BRONTË, 1948a).

In his reply, Lewes reminds Brontë that Jane Austen is a **novelist**, not a poet, and that her merit lies in the fact that she is “one of the greatest artists, one of the greatest painters of human character” that ever lived (LEWES, 1984, p.241). But Brontë sees things differently. In her next letter she asks, “Can there be a great artist without poetry? [...] Miss Austen being, as you say, without “sentiment,” without **poetry**, maybe **is** sensible, real (more **real** than **true**), but she cannot be great” (BRONTË, 1984b).

This difference between Lewes' and Brontë's perceptions about quality in a work of art, besides representing the sort of critical debate carried on at the time, reveals that both of them are making the same mistake. Lewes is unfair to Brontë, and Brontë is unfair to Austen, because they tend to apply to the authors parameters that do not relate to what they are doing. Lewes blames Brontë for not being Neoclassical, and Brontë blames Austen for not being Romantic. Perhaps they should better adopt A. W. Schlegel's concept of Perspectivism, with the premise that “each work of art must be considered from its own point of view” (SCHLEGEL, 1955, p.51). Brontë's discrimination of Austen is excusable if we consider that she is defending herself against a charge for doing what she considers her responsibility to do: to bring emotion and poetic imagery into the narrative text. Brontë's attitude becomes even more understandable if we observe that Lewes is not the first reviewer to disapprove of a style which was the subject of much dissension.

Although the agenda of the Romantic Movement can be very clear-cut for us nowadays, it is pertinent to observe that it is only after the death of the Brontës that literary critics will coin the expression “The Romantic School”. Byron himself lived and died uninformed of the fact that he was the leader of a literary movement, although he is certainly aware of the aesthetic ideas current in his time, having read Mme de Staël's *De l'Allemagne*, and A. W. Schlegel's *Lectures*. To Byron (controversial as always), the great English poet was Alexander Pope “the moral poet of all civilization, and should be the national poet of mankind” (BYRON, 1901, p.164). Byron also suspects that “We are upon a wrong revolutionary poetic system or systems, not worth a damn in itself [...] I have been amongst the builders of this Babel, [...] and I am ashamed of it” (BYRON, 1901, p.165).

The romantic traits in *Jane Eyre* are easily identified in the light of the structural parameters that we have today – which did not exist in Brontë's time: the personal confessional tone provided by the first person narrator; the emotional division of characters in the novel, where those who support the protagonist's views are right and those who don't are wrong. Miss Blanche Ingram, for instance, is criticised for her interest in marrying Rochester for his fortune; whereas he is seen as a victim when he is constrained by his family to travel to the West Indies to marry a rich heiress he does not even know. Other strong romantic traits come in the Gothic structure of the novel, and in the way all elements in the narrative – the seasons of the year, the aspects of light and shade related to Thornfield mansion, the movements of the creature locked in the attic – respond to the emotional and psychological needs of the protagonist.

Easy as it may seem for us to identify such traces nowadays, Brontë did not have the map of what she was doing when she did it. She was immersed in the notions respecting literature that prevailed in her time, a time when **a good character** meant a character who was morally good, a character who possessed a good character. The aesthetic value of a work was ranked below its moral worth. Apparently, Brontë accepted those rules. This can be felt in the letter she writes to her editor, where she declares that “if what an author writes does no good to the reader, he feels he has missed his aim, wasted, in a great measure, his time and labour” (BRONTË, 1995).

In the well-known “Editor's Preface to the 1850 New Edition of *Wuthering heights*”, (BRONTË, 2003, p.313-317) however, the romantic undercurrent rises unexpectedly in another of those statements that can be taken as an artistic manifesto. After trying without success to find some traces of moral goodness in Heathcliff, Brontë asserts his incontestable greatness on an aesthetic basis. After doing this, she produces her own statement about the creative act,

The writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master – something that at times strangely wills and works for itself. [...] Be the work grim or glorious, dread or divine, you have little choice left but quiescent adoption. As for you, the nominal artist – your share in it has been to work passively under dictates you neither delivered nor could question. [...] If the result be attractive, the world will praise you, who little deserve the praise; if it be repulsive, the same world will blame you, who almost as little deserve blame (BRONTË, 2003, p.316).

The great distance between the things Charlotte Brontë believes as a person and her attitude as an author is typical of her “schizophrenic” times. Even if unconsciously, Brontë's ambivalent movement is subtle and dexterous: she starts by taking the Victorian ideal of a “good character” for granted: “Whether it is right or advisable to create things like Heathcliff, I do not know: I hardly think it is”

(BRONTË, 2003, p.316). After publicly acknowledging this fact, she strategically introduces her convictions concerning the commitment of the artist. What, in personal terms, might be taken as confusion and inconsistency, is now raised into the realm of artistic representation.

Antithesis: *Jane Eyre* is a Victorian construct

Victorians were fascinated with discussing religious issues, which were considered interesting, intellectual, and – most of all – fashionable. We can feel how proudly Brontë fills *Jane Eyre* with religious allusions and quotations from the Bible, and what strong opinions she has about the different branches of the Dissent Movement. Historian George Macaulay Trevelyan (1985, p.449) says that “the whole period was marked by interest in religious questions and was deeply influenced by seriousness of thought and self-discipline of character, an outcome of the Puritan ethos”. And literary critic Walter Allen (1980) attributes this Puritan ethos to the rise of the new working classes and the impact of the freshly developed concept of **Respectability**. According to Allen, until the end of the eighteenth-century, a “respectable person” was a person of good or fair social standing, who also possessed a reputation for an ascertained set of moral attributes. With the growth of the Evangelical Movement, with its emphasis on respectability, the concept widened to include anyone considered “decent”, that is, bearing an honest behaviour and clean habits, irrespective of social position.

The general acceptance of the idea of respectability by the Victorians marks the importance of this new middle-classed notion that “to be respectable is to be at once orthodox and fashionable” (ALLEN, 1980, p.145). In *Jane Eyre*, St. John Rivers and his sisters embody such qualities. In spite of lacking fortune, their moral and cultural status renders them respectable. Diana and Mary marry appropriately, well and within their station. Diana marries a captain in the navy, “a gallant officer and a good man” (chapter 38). Although officers rank below the lines of aristocracy, naval officers were much respected at the time because of the prestige gathered after the victory against the Napoleonic fleets at the Battle of Trafalgar, in 1805. Mary’s husband is a clergyman. His social position is possibly inferior to that of the officer, as the condescending epithet in his presentation goes “from his attainments and principles, worthy of the connection” (chapter 38).

We will concentrate on the character of St. John Rivers to illustrate the issues of religion and respectability. St. John, aware of the responsibility implied in his profession, places his duty above everything else, including his personal life. His conduct is so distinguished that he wins the admiration of the richest family in the place, the Olivers. Young Rosamond Oliver is overtly interested in him, and St. John’s feelings for her are strong too. Nevertheless, although Rosamond’s father seems to approve of the match (chapter 33), St. John rejects the idea. He is too much

aware of his religious commitment (he means to travel to India as a missionary), and too conscious of his social position to allow himself to marry above his station. This rational, self-imposing decision, contrasts with the story of St. John's paternal uncle – the father of Jane Eyre – who had also been a clergyman. Jane's father, romantically, married a woman from the upper strata, who was therefore disinherited by her family. He took his bride – and Jane, the child they begot – into his missionary life. Looking after sick people, in an outbreak of some epidemics, he and his wife got contaminated and died, leaving the baby, the protagonist in the novel, in a difficult situation. If St. John's behaviour seems too harsh and too proud; Jane's father's behaviour, on the other hand, seems too inconsequential and starry-eyed. At a certain point in the story Jane herself will have to make decisions of the same nature concerning her own future.

This obsession for being “respectable” is a strong feature in Victorianism. The attention to details, to the tiniest social subtleties, is so cherished, that sometimes it over seeds other bigger issues. Critics of *Jane Eyre* do not blame Rochester so much for committing bigamy as they do for his disregard of social practice. Firstly, there is the irresponsibility in forgetting his position. In this sense, St. John's behaviour is more dignified than Rochester's. As a gentleman, older and more experienced – Rochester could not allow such a dangerous intimacy to be established between himself and his artless, underage hireling. And there is also the language he uses. Rochester curses openly. His frequent expression “With the deuce!”, is candidly written down in full print – a proof that the author, Mr Currer Bell (the male penname adopted by Brontë) – is as obscene as the character he created. The current practice in Victorian writing was to avoid that kind of rough language. However, if a swearword were extremely necessary, the acceptable graphic representation would be to write the first letter of the word, and use one dash to substitute for every remaining letter. In this case, the forbidden word “deuce”, should be presented as “With the d _ _ _ _!”.

The problem with Mr Rochester's speech goes beyond the form of his words, it reaches their content. He makes Jane a confidant in subjects concerning his sexual life. He tells her about his affairs with a French opera-dancer, Céline Varens; with Giacinta, the unprincipled violent Italian beauty; and with Clara, the reliable but dull German lover. G.E. Lewes' unsigned review in the *Leader* says that Mr Rochester possesses “the profanity, brutality, and slang of the misanthropic profligate” and that the book reveals “a total ignorance of the habits of society, a great coarseness of taste, and a heathenish doctrine of religion” (LEWES, 1974, p.218).

Brontë's biographer Juliet Barker (1994) examines the question from the safe distance of one and a half century, and captures how much the Victorian approach to the book can show about the preoccupations and interests of the time.

The Brontë novels have held such an honoured place in the corpus of English Literature for so long that it is difficult today to conceive the shock and moral outrage that greeted their first publications. *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, in particular, flouted almost every convention. It was not simply the unprecedented passion with which they were written that dismayed the critics: the stories and characters, too, displayed all those qualities which polite Victorians most feared – a disregard for social niceties, an obsession (as it was seen then) with violence, cruelty and vice, and a complete lack of that satisfying morality which doled out rewards to the innocent and good and punished those who had done wrong (BARKER, 1994, p.90).

According to Walter Allen, the negative aspect implicit in the invention of this new moral discourse of respectability is that it renders the social question an intricate affair. The enfeeblement of any specific class feeling, which until the 18th century could make any kind of abuse be felt as an instance of man's tyranny over man, is now turned into the diffuse tyranny of economic forces. The discourse of respectability, preaching the mitigation of this new oppression through the exertion of thrift and self-control, is supported by the full force of public opinion, by the middle-classes and by the working classes as well. John Henry Cardinal Newman (1974) has a famous description of a gentleman. To him, a gentleman "has too much good sense to be affronted at insults, he is too well employed to remember injuries, and too indolent to bear malice" (NEWMAN, 1974, p.292). This notion was much admired at the time. Read from a Marxist perspective, however, if we consider that Newman's speech was addressed to an audience of Irish Catholics, a new dimension is added to the issue, that relates to the maintenance of a set of specific political interests.

Another consequence of this Puritan heritage is the severe contradiction at the core of the Victorian era. Never had the rules of behaviour and morality been so strictly enforced. And yet – maybe as a consequence to that – never were the rates of prostitution and crime so high in the country (FINNEGAN, 1974). The doctrine of "do as I say, not as I do" is one of the harshest objects of satire in *Jane Eyre*, especially in respect to the Reed family and Rev. Brocklehurst. As a child, in Gateshead, Jane is constantly punished for being "false and deceitful", when every one knows that the misdeeds are actually performed by her cousins. Mrs Reed's position is also revealing: socially she stands as the exemplary relative who shelters her destitute poor connection. In private, we witness how jealous she is of Jane, and how cruelly the child is treated.

Then, there is the farcical contrast between the opulence of Rev. Brocklehurst's family and the severe discipline he demands from the orphan girls in Lowood orphanage (chapter 7). In spite of the ludicrous and caricatured presentation of this character, however, he introduces Jane to the mechanisms of society: children who

obey their elders are “good” and deserve rewards; those who don’t are wicked, and wicked children go to hell when they die. After presenting this rhetorical exercise, Brocklehurst asks Jane whether she would rather be a good girl and get a gingerbread-nut as a reward, or be wicked and go to hell. She deliberates for a while, and decides to “keep in good health, and not die” (chapter 4).

So huge is the bridge separating what *should* be done from what *was* done in Victorian times that we have a number of books playing with the image of the double. Robert Louis Stevenson’s (2005) *The strange case of Dr Jeckyll and Mr Hyde* is a good illustration of the dichotomies we find in Victorian times, which are built out of contradictory forces. The epoch is simultaneously strict and puritanical, extremely romantic, esoteric, pious and atheistic. On the one hand, religion is the most comprehensive and important academic subject, involving personal life, politics, and also foreign policy. On the other hand, the influence of the Church in matter-of-fact aspects of personal life is evidently and progressively decreasing. This can be felt in *Jane Eyre*. Religious as our protagonist may be, she refuses to sit and wait to be rescued by Providence. This point was readily detected by Victorian critics, and deserved a complaint from Lady Eastlake, who accused *Jane Eyre* of being an “anti-Christian composition”:

Altogether the auto-biography of *Jane Eyre* is pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition. There is throughout a murmuring against the comforts of the rich and against the privations of the poor, which, as far as each individual is concerned, is a murmuring against God’s appointment – there is a proud and perpetual assertion of the rights of man, for which we find no authority either in God’s word or in God’s providence – there is that pervading tone of ungodly discontent which is at once the most prominent and the most subtle evil which the law and the pulpit, which all civilized society in fact has at the present day to contend with (EASTLAKE, 1968, p.15).

Maybe as a consequence of this discontent concerning the established Church, the number of dissenting groups rapidly increased in England. Besides the Roman Catholic Church and the three Old Dissent Sects that generated the Methodist family of churches (CUNNINGHAM, 1977) comprising Quakers, Congregationalists and Baptists – there were the Presbyterian Church of Ireland, the Free-Church of Scotland, the Evangelicals, Positivists, Wesleyans, Baptists, Calvinists, Puritans, Bible Christians, Antinomians, Congregationalists, Utilitarians, Nonconformists, and many other denominations. In the *Whitaker’s almanack* of 1890 we can find up to 244 different religious groups (CUNNINGHAM, 1977, p.15).

One of the most extraordinary consequences of this muddled panorama is that, precisely in a time when religion was intellectually the most relevant interest of a whole community, the prestige of its representatives never ranked so low. The direct and practical influence of the Established Church of England clergy grew less and

less concrete upon the lives of the parishioners. Although the clergymen's social status required a degree of sophistication, culture, and prosperity, their income was increasingly shabbier. Eventually, the solution was to form an ecumenical league that supported the academic studies and later the maintenance of the clergy, in spite of their ideological contentions.

Dr Valentine Cunningham sees a connection between several aspects of religious life and the route of development of the English novel as a genre. Cunningham traces the roots of this tradition back to Daniel Defoe,

Defoe wrote a sort of programme for the English novel. The Puritan background, the diary-keeping habit, the practice of daily self-scrutiny before God, provided him, as it were, with some of the novel's most recognizable features, particularly its sense of what would be continually important to it: the everyday, the domestic circumstance; the quotidian process, the diurnal round (what happened next); and the ordinary life of ordinary people (CUNNINGHAM, 1977, p.107).

In spite of being considered a pious time, the delineation of religion in nineteenth-century novels is peculiar. We have the unvarying moralistic approach, and the appraisal of legitimate Christian virtue. Nevertheless, the representatives of institutionalized religion are often depicted as intellectually feeble, as laughable or farcical characters. In *Jane Eyre* we have Brocklehurst, the burlesque "black pillar," and St. John Rivers, hiding his demonic frozen depths as a marble "white pillar". Jane Austen's curates usually reflect the same innuendoes. Dickens' preachers are also usually physically ugly and cracked.

If Church of England clergymen can be subjected to such derision, the situation of the other denominations is even worse. According to Stephen Marcus, there is a portion of pleasure and fascination in the interest exerted on the Victorian public by the themes of brutal sadism and sexual immorality represented in Catholicism,

Roman Catholicism is a pornographer's paradise, and there is, as they say, evidence to back up every charge. All priests are lechers, satyrs, pimps, all nuns are concubines or lesbians or both. The confessional is the locus of meeting of lubricity and piety. This perfect balance of outrage and envy is matched by a similar ambivalence of idea; the Church of Rome, like everyone's parents, is at once ascetically denying us the gratification of our impulses and hypocritically wallowing in a highly sexualized existence, making love over the nasty sty (CUNNINGHAM, 1977, p.107).

Although in a less explicit way than in her other novels, Brontë's peculiar relation with Catholicism is also perceptible in *Jane Eyre*. We have cousin Eliza Reed, who becomes a Catholic nun. She is always busy, though the outcome of her work is never grasped; she is constantly reading her prayer book, and says

that what interests her there is “the rubric” (chapter 22). She wants to live in a convent because there she can “seek a retirement where punctual habits would be permanently secured from disturbance, and place safe barriers between herself and a frivolous world” (chapter 22). Jane’s final verdict is that “You are not without sense, cousin Eliza; but what you have, I suppose, in another year will be walled up alive in a French convent” (chapter 22).

The case with Adèle, Mr Rochester’s French warden, is more complex, because there Brontë’s aversion of Catholicism mingles with her British sense of xenophobia. Although Jane congratulates herself on never underrating Adèle for being an illegitimate child, she cannot accept the manifest possibility that Adèle may be Mr Rochester’s daughter. Jane’s plea is that the girl shows a “superficiality of character, inherited probably from her mother, hardly congenial with the English mind” (chapter 15). At the end of the novel Jane is glad to tell us that she has found a very good school for Adèle, where “a sound English education corrected in a great measure her French defects”(chapter 38).

The greatest contribution of Dr Valentine Cunningham to the work of the Brontës, in my opinion, lies in his identification of the two elements, derived from their religious experience, that account for some of the most prominent features in their fiction. The first is the fact that all the Brontës use Methodism as a referent for passion. “Extremes of feeling, behaviour, and religious enthusiasm can be defined by reference to Methodism” (CUNNINGHAM, 1977, p.136). The second is the use they make of Methodism to create their “rhetoric of passion”.

The world was taken aback by the frankness of their passion [...] Evangelicals drew back their shirts from *Jane Eyre*. [...] The Brontës’ novels, though, are empty of real physicality; their dominant feeling is yearning for fulfilment, based on the authoresses’ profound sexual innocence. But by appropriating the rhetoric of Methodism’s love of God, exploiting the language of Divine love for earthly love, they deceived the world. Harriet Martineau complained: “I do not like the love, either the kind or the degree of it”. The kind and the degree are, in fact, borrowed from Methodism. (CUNNINGHAM, 1977).

In *Jane Eyre*, the strain of this double commitment with duty and passion is represented in Jane’s insoluble dilemma whether to leave Rochester or remain with him, presented in a thirty-five pages long section of the novel (chapter 27). Either of the solutions is unrealizable, because it involves betrayal – be it on a social or on a personal dimension.

The Victorian conflict is present everywhere, in the Victorian author, in the Victorian reader, in the Victorian critic. This is amply reflected in all things concerning *Jane Eyre*. Professor George P. Landow (1990) emphasizes this double nature of Victorianism. Besides the Puritanical morality, and the social hypocrisy,

we also have the 19th Century as the direct parent to modernity. It is in Victorian England that we witness the outset of feminism, the unionization of workers, socialism, industrialization, that we meet modern problems and modern solutions. That is an age of paradox, of power, that bears an ambivalent position in relation to all aspects of social life (LANDOW, 1990).

Synthesis: an escape through imagination

In a period of such conflicting ideologies, the use of symbolic imagination may come as an unexpected solution to solve unsolvable situations, because it triggers a kind of interaction that reaches beyond the domains of rationality. When we consider the uses of Imagination made by Charlotte Brontë, the first thing to contemplate is the mighty effort made by the author to control her fancy so as to reach a satisfactory aesthetic result. The creation of *Jane Eyre* comes as the third stage in Brontë's process of dealing with the ascendancy of Romantic influence over her work. During the years of the Juvenilia, the imagination of the author flew freely and unconstrained. Charlotte's first fictional hero was, significantly, the Duke of Wellington, whose person she worshipped throughout her life. Almost twenty years after the beginnings of *Angria*, (where she herself played the part of *Genius Tallii*) we find Charlotte worried with the proportions their imaginary world had taken. Aware that she, her brother and her sisters have some difficulty to establish authentic relations with people outside their close circle, or even to keep to any job situation, she determines to set her feet to the ground, and remain within the scope of the real and commonplace in her writing. It is in this spirit that Brontë writes *The professor*. The gates to romance were so tightly closed that the book did not attract the interest of any editor. It is only after the help offered by members of Smith, Elder & Co. that the necessary stasis is reached that enables Charlotte to write *Jane Eyre*. The novel shows the blend of a natural inclination to emotion and imagination, and a strong determination to keep the narrative as much as possible under control. This fusion makes of *Jane Eyre* one legitimate representation of Victorian literature. In every level of its composition we find that double commitment to feeling and morality that we here call the clash of the "Victorian Predicament". We find this clash in the plot, with the moral puzzle it presents; in the main character, as witnessed in the colour imagery of white and red referring to her inner life; or in the symmetric disposition of all narrative devices.

One could also consider the fact that the novel belongs in the *Bildungsroman* gender, where the whole structure of the work is created to enhance the progress of the protagonist. This offers us the possibility of reading *Jane Eyre* as a mythic narrative, as a quest myth, where the heroine undergoes five different stages of experience, in five geographically distinct places. Whenever she moves forward into the next stage, there is also a connection made backwards, as if to perform the

cyclic movement needed in any process of emotional growth. So that the process of development is accomplished, some strange turns are forced upon the plot, because psychological truth is to take precedence over the elements of concrete physical existence. Possibility, laws of nature, daily life limitations, moral codes, are often overruled in the progress of Jane's mythic journey.

Gubar and Gilbert (1979) mention the connexion between the emotional state of the protagonist and the movements of Bertha Mason from the attic into the house. Whenever Jane is in psychological danger, afraid of the unknown, the madwoman substantiates a concrete cause for her fears. The manifest impediment to Jane's union to Rochester is the fact that he is already married. There are other, more subtle impediments, though, indicating that Jane is neither ready or able to cope with the many barriers to their wished-for equality,

Literally, of course, the nighttime specter is none other than Bertha Mason Rochester. But on a figurative and psychological level it seems suspiciously clear that the specter of Bertha is still another – indeed the most threatening – avatar of Jane. What Bertha now *does*, for instance, is what Jane wants to do. Disliking the “vapoury veil” of Jane Rochester, Jane Eyre secretly wants to tear the garments up. Bertha does it for her. Fearing the inexorable “bridal day”, Jane would like to put it off. Bertha does that for her too. Resenting the new mastery of Rochester, whom she sees as “*dread* but adored”, (ital. ours), she wishes to be his equal in size and strength, so that she can battle him in the context of their marriage. Bertha is “a big woman, in stature almost equalling her husband”, has the necessary “virile force” (chap. 26). Bertha, in other words, is Jane's truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead (GUBAR; GILBERT, 1979, p.359-360).

John Maynard (1987) extends this remark to the territory of sexuality, where Jane's unconscious resistance to marrying Rochester reveals her fear of his sexual force. Yet, all the codes and standards of external reality are respected, like the taboos and rituals that are always an important presence in mythic allegories. Maynard's close reading of the novel contemplates the structural symmetry of the narrative. In his chapter “Sexual awakening in the romance world”, Maynard presents a detailed study of Jane's traumatic experience in the Red Room (*JE*, chapter 2). The place, very majestic in its decoration of “deep red damask” and “snowy counterpanes”, is impregnated with the memory of her late uncle's masculine worshipped presence, as a haunting father-figure Jane both loves and fears, someone to be remembered with religious reverence. His bed is supported on “massive pillars of mahogany”, “like a tabernacle in the centre”; the blinds of the windows are half “shrouded”; the easy chair near the head of the bed looks like “a pale throne”. After minutely inspecting every detail of that dreadful episode, Maynard traces an analogy to a

similarly red room, in Thornfield Hall, eight years later: “There again she finds the red of passion, but this time from curtains really on fire. The equally real older man in the room threatens her not with the imagination of passion, but with actual ‘strange fire in his look’” (MAYNARD, 1987, p.103).

The symbolic dimension of the narrative is consistently represented in the aesthetic use made of British folklore. From the Irish folk tales she learns from Bessie, in her childhood, into the imagery she responds to as an adult, many openings are visible in the text inviting us to a parallel, symbolic reading of the story.

There is a marked contrast between Jane’s outward plain and insignificant appearance, and the fiery personality she possesses – and strives to domesticate. There is also a magical dimension that is constantly hinted at in the narrative, through which we can reach Jane’s deeper feelings. There is a special set of words and symbols that privilege this enchanted dimension of communication in the narrative. They help us deal with the gaps, the non-verbal aspects of the book. Among them, we select the reference to the Changeling imagery.

Sir Edwin Sidney Hartland (1891) defines the changeling as a creature from the British folklore, very similar to a human being, but who in fact it belongs to fairyland. When fairies or elves have ugly babies, they sometimes steal beautiful new born humans and leave their elf-children in their place. Therefore, any strange-looking, awkward, homely child can be a changeling left by fairies in place of a pretty human baby that was taken away. According to Sir Hartland, although it is difficult to find out if an ugly child is a changeling, “under careful management it may be led to betray himself in speech or action”, revealing its special aptitudes (HARTLAND, 1891, p.103). Several hints in the novel approximate Jane from this definition of this magical creature. As a child, she searches for fairies under the mushrooms in the garden. In the Red Room scene, when she sees her own reflection in the mirror, Jane is scared as she finds a strange little creature gazing at her with “glittering eyes of fear” (chapter 2).

As a changeling, Jane, when roused, may also “betray herself in speech or action” (HARTLAND, 1891, p.104). This happens three times in the narrative, when she is emotionally pushed too far. Jane’s first outburst happens is when she addresses Mrs Reed, after the interview with Rev. Brocklehurst. The degree of articulation Jane reveals then would be impossible for a human child to reach. “**Speak** I must” (chapter 4). Mrs Reed, who behaves “as if she really did not know whether I were child or fiend” (Idem) will remember to her death the “unchild manner” (Ibidem) in which she was addressed by the little girl. The second time Jane betrays her changeling nature “in speech or action” happens exactly in the middle of the novel, when she confronts Mr Rochester in a way unimaginable for a servant to address her master. Rochester dices with fate and tells her she must leave

Thornfield because he has found a new situation for her in Ireland. He behaves as if he is not concerned about her feelings. “The vehemence of emotion, stirred by grief and love within me, was claiming mastery, and struggling for full sway, and asserting a right to predominate, to overcome, to live, rise, and reign at last: yes, – and to speak” (chapter 23).

The third scene arises near the end of the story, symmetrical to the first, when St. John attempts to convince her, by force of reason, to emigrate to India with him. Differently from the two former scenes, this is a silent one. St. John simply embraces her, and, almost as a direct consequence of that physical contact, Jane listens to Rochester’s urgent call. The fantastic dimension of their connection comes into play here, reminding us that Rochester partakes of the world of fairies, as she does, that they belong in the same dimension. It is this irrational, preternatural contact established between Jane and Rochester, that determines her hasty return to Thornfield, against everything that is sensible or orally justifiable.

Rochester recognizes Jane’s nature from the first time they meet, when he accuses her of having “bewitched his horse” (chapter 13). Fairy, witch, changeling, unearthly creature, elf, sorcerer, sprite, imp, are only some among the many epithets he uses to refer to Jane in the novel. When they are finally reunited, in Ferndean, at the end of the story, Jane says he looks like a “brownie”, and Rochester remarks that she is a “mocking changeling – fairy-born and human-bred” (chapter 38).

Brontë’s commitment to the unconscious is reflected everywhere in the novel. This achievement seems to rest on a consistent mythical foundation that reaches beyond the limits of verbalization, touching some basic intuition we form about love, loneliness, the need of companionship, and other such primitive needs. The merit of *Jane Eyre*, therefore, lies on the very delicate articulation between the rational and poetic aspects of existence. This novel is meant to be read with the same blend of rational and intuitive elements in which it was written. In fact, we do that, as readers. When we read we are providentially free from the limitations of our rational side. Unfortunately, when we work as critics, we tend to become more limited. As Mr Rochester points, when examining Jane’s paintings, we “only secure the shadow of our thought” (ref. to chapter 13).

Thus, the importance of Brontë’s use of myth and imagination. These devices enable her to reach her reader on other levels than the exclusively rational aspects of communication. The layers of meaning lying just beneath the rational surface are more readily affected through her use of poetic language.

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■ **RESUMO:** *O presente trabalho investiga as estratégias utilizadas pela escritora Charlotte Brontë, no romance Jane Eyre, para contornar o dilema enfrentado pela protagonista, que precisa escolher entre fazer o que considera correto, ou seguir seus instintos e sua intuição. Esse conflito é tratado aqui como sendo o “Impasse Vitoriano”, um embate entre elementos contraditórios do vitorianismo. Por um lado, existe um código moral muito rígido, representado pelo Movimento Evangélico, que fomenta um ideal de respeitabilidade condizente com a nova classe média emergente. Por outro lado, surge a influência do Movimento Romântico, que propõe uma nova ética associada a uma nova estética. A tese proposta aqui é que o uso de um imaginário simbólico soluciona o problema criado por esse compromisso simultâneo para com a moralidade e o sentimento, além de contribuir para sedimentar o uso da prosa poética, um dos traços predominantes no estilo da autora.*

■ **Palavras-chave:** *Charlotte Brontë. Jane Eyre. Vitorianismo. Literatura Vitoriana. Movimento Evangélico.*

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