A Comparative Study on *Jane Eyre* and *Catherine Earnshaw*

Mengdan Chen

Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou, Fujian, China.

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**'Corresponding author:** Mengdan Chen, Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou, Fujian, China.

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**Abstract**

In the 19th century, the drawbacks of capitalism were exposed, and patriarchy was prevalent in Britain. At that time, women had no right to speak and had no status of their own. The works of the Bronte Sisters, seen as ideological forerunners of the women's liberation movement, are recognized as the true starting point of British female literature. Charlotte Bronte and Emily Bronte are among the most influential Victorian writers. Through analysis and comparison, this thesis explores the Bronte Sisters' ideas on how Victorian women evolved to become independent. It then prompts reflective thinking on how modern women can achieve self-improvement and self-reliance by studying characters like Jane Eyre and Catherine Earnshaw. The author of this thesis argues that Jane Eyre's self-improvement, independence, and pursuit of equality, as well as Catherine's contradictory personality and submission to reality, are highly thought-provoking for readers. In love, women should have their own freedom and independence in spirit and personality.

**Keywords**

Bronte Sisters, Women's Independence, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*

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1. Brief Introduction to the Two Authors

Bronte Sisters’ views of female liberation have a profound background. In the nineteenth century, although Britain took the lead in the industrial revolution and ranked first in the world economy, its ideology was not completely liberalized. In such a male-oriented era, women were almost denied social rights. At that time, the peaceful social scene was replaced by the ills of capitalism, social turmoil, and intensified contradictions in Britain, leading to the decline of the so-called "capitalist paradise". Patriarchal ideology prevailed, and discrimination against women and deprivation of their rights became a social phenomenon. Most women chose to submit and remained silent. Bronte sisters’ creations are a reflection of an era and have milestone importance.

As one of the most influential female writers in the Victorian age, Charlotte Brontë authored four novels in her short life, namely, *The Professor* (1857, completed in 1846), *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1849), and *Villette* (1853). Charlotte started magazines, wrote books, did writing and translation, and studied French. Based on her poor and humble life, her works mainly focused on the loneliness, hardships, and struggles of the poor petty bourgeoisie.

Emily Bronte, the authoress of *Wuthering Heights*, loved to write about myths and legends since childhood. Her wild, abnormal, unique imagination was no doubt influenced by the strange Irish stories told by her father. Emily was reticent but passionate. She was quiet but passionate. The difference in terms of temperament between the two sisters colors their works and characters.
2. A Comparison of Jane Eyre and Catherine Earnshaw in Background

In this chapter, the author of the thesis makes a comparison of Jane Eyre and Catherine Earnshaw in background. In general, Jane Eyre’s experience is torturous and full of hardships. By comparison, Catherine Earnshaw is more tempestuous and unique.

2.1 An Analysis of Jane Eyre's Course of Growth

Jane is born into a poor priest's family. Both parents died of typhoid within a month of each other. Little Jane is fostered in her aunt's house in Gateshead where she suffers from discrimination and abuse by her aunt for ten years after the death of her uncle. She is then sent to an orphanage called Lowood where the rules are strict and the director is a hypocrite. Jane Eyre is mentally and physically tortured there. After graduation, Jane Eyre stays to teach for two years there and then advertises for a job as a governess. Rochester, the master of Thornfield Manor, hires Jane. In the course of time, he and Jane fall in love. However, their romance undergoes difficult processes. When Jane discovers that Rochester has a wife, she leaves the manor in humiliation. With the help of the priest St. John, Jane Eyre finds a job as a village teacher. Then the priest John proposes to Jane, but Jane refuses. With an epiphany of love, she returns to Thornfield Manor, which has become ruins because Rochester's wife sets fire to the house and dies in the disaster. Rochester is also injured and disabled. Finally, Jane Eyre is reunited with Rochester and marries him (Crowther, T., 2020).

2.2 An Analysis of Catherine Earnshaw's Background

As the lady of Wuthering Heights, Catherine lives in comfortable surroundings and enjoys the love of her father. Catherine has always maintained to be kind and simple by nature. In her love with Heathcliff in her youth, Catherine believes that love is eternal and romantic. On the one side, she is rebellious and capricious; on the other side, there is wild, pure, and unadulterated beauty in her soul. However, she succumbs to the temptations of money and status. After Heathcliff's departure and marriage with Linton, she feels that she has betrayed her heart and suffers a guilty of consciousness. Linton fails to win the heart of Catherine, and the couple maintains an appearance of happiness. After Heathcliff returns to Wuthering Heights, the flame of passion between Catherine and him is rekindled. Nevertheless, Catherine feels miserable and anguish and is torn between the pursuit of ideal love and compliance with social reality. Finally, after giving birth to her daughter, she passes away in distress.

3. A Comparison of Jane Eyre and Catherine Earnshaw in Personality

The portrayal of the characters is one of the major concerns of classic works. First, the author of the thesis analyzes Jane Eyre's personality, focusing on her inferiority complex, self-improvement, and self-confidence. Second, the author of the thesis analyzes Catherine Earnshaw’s contradictory personality and tragedy of life-based on Freud's “id”, “ego” and “superego” theory.

3.1 An Analysis of Jane Eyre's Personality

Jane Eyre’s personality undergoes a process of perfection and elevation, from self-abasement to self-confidence, through self-improvement, which is bound up with the background of the times and the growing environment.

(a) Inferiority complex

Inferiority is the inner part of Jane Eyre's character formation and development. Jane Eyre's choice proves that she has outstanding self-consciousness, but her aesthetic criticism and value orientation of partners reflect her traditional psychology of attachment. From the plot point of view, when Jane meets Miss Ingram, her sense of inferiority makes her despair that she is not good enough for Rochester. In the personal environment, Jane's parents died young, and Jane suffered from loneliness and misery in Gateshead and Lowood. The self-suppression of subjectivity led to her inner inferiority, which made Jane very passive in her love with Rochester.

(b) Self-improvement

Self-improvement is an evident characteristic of Jane's personality. Although she is plain and poor, God gives her an intelligent mind for thinking. Since childhood, Jane Eyre always maintains confidence and tenacity of spirit, which can not be defeated even when she is abused by her aunt. In the orphanage, her sense of independence and her freedom of self-expression are stimulated by the cruel treatment and harsh living conditions to a higher level.
Jane’s unyielding soul is like a blazing flame. She is poor but ambitious, small in body but strong in soul. In her view, everyone is the same before God. All human beings are equal in personality, despite differences in status, wealth, and appearance—as she declaims before Rochester.

(c) Self-confidence

The elevation from inferiority to self-improvement is a metamorphosis for Jane in the face of hardships and oppression in Gateshead and Lowood. More importantly, self-confidence finally completes the sublimation of Jane Eyre’s character—she begins to have a clear understanding of her life. She becomes firm despite external pressure and turbulence, and her confidence embodies her independence in thinking about society, life, and individuality. This self-confidence is also reflected in her self-respect and personal views on ethics. This choice reflects Jane’s principle of quality in marriage. Jane Eyre prefers the certainty of self-value, self-esteem, equality, and happiness to the basic needs of life in the choice of love. Such a character with feminist color represents the transformation and improvement of female self-consciousness. Jane Eyre’s self-respect, self-reliance, and self-improvement are the eternal charms of this novel (DeiTos, J. R., 2019).

3.2 An Analysis of Catherine Earnshaw’s Personality

Compared with Jane’s harmonious characteristics, Catherine Earnshaw’s personality is more complex and contradictory. In contrast, Catherine’s innocence and desire for wealth and honor result in her tragic fate. Catherine’s personality is an extremely complex paradox. The soul of Catherine is torn between yearning for the ideal love and pursuing material comfort.

Freud thinks that there are many unconscious, hidden feelings, desires, and impulses in the subconscious mind. In his later life, he put forward the theory that the whole personality was made up of three systems: id, ego, and superego. In a person of sound mind, these three systems form a unified and harmonious organizational structure. When the three systems of personality conflict with each other, a person is in a malfunctioning state (Lee, So-Young, 2020).

The “id” is the original self, the earliest and most primitive part of the personality. It is the source of instinctive impulses, at the original, impersonal, and completely unconscious spiritual level. The id acts on the pleasure principle, ignoring social morality and external norms of behavior. In Wuthering Heights, Catherine faintly reveals her wild and restless self, and she lives an unfettered and free life in Wuthering Heights. Wilderness and moors provide a natural environment in which Catherine can grow up freely both physically and mentally and cultivate a love of nature.

The “ego” is the part of oneself that is conscious of performing thoughts, feelings, judgments, or memories. When there is a strong conflict between the id and superego demands, these conflicts are mediated by the ego. The ego follows the principles of reality. The ego is not only responsible for balancing the inner id and superego but also responsible for considering the requirements of the external reality. In the novel, when Catherine breaks into Thrushcross Grange, her ego is impressed by the comfortable life of a noble family, and her views on life and values begin to change.

“Superego” is one aspect of personality. It is formed by internalizing moral norms and values of the social and cultural environment in the process of individual growth, and its function is mainly to supervise, criticize, and discipline its behavior. It follows moral principles. In the work, Catherine’s marriage with Linton is a semblance of happiness. When Heathcliff returns to the manor, their reunion makes Catherine happy, but the lingering sense of guilty consciousness for Linton in addition to Heathcliff’s mad revenge becomes the cause of Catherine’s internal grief. This kind of superego, obeying “moral principle”, restrains her all the time, and her inner contradictions and entanglements once again torment her and place her on the verge of collapse. Unfortunately, she passes away in guilt and self-reproach (Lee, Yera., 2019).

4. A Comparison of Jane Eyre and Catherine Earnshaw’s Views on Marriage

Jane Eyre is based on a tone of optimism, brightness, and uplifting force, while Wuthering Heights is in a gloomy tone. In these two love stories, the heroines Jane Eyre and Catherine courageously pursue love with bold rebellious spirit under specific conditions, and both have different endings.

In the love with Rochester, Jane is confident, decisive, and adheres to the choice of self, and dares to take the initiative sometimes. She loves Rochester because she sees the wise light in his mind and the fire in his firm and
stern speech. This is exactly Jane Eyre's image of an ideal lover. Jane Eyre's fortitude, integrity, and contempt for dignitaries are also reflected in her principles of marriage.

Jane Eyre's rational mind keeps her rational and calm even when she is at the peak of happiness and frenzy of love. This is exactly the reason why Jane Eyre leaves Rochester without hesitation after she is aware that Rochester's wife is still alive and she still can not get equal status and rights. When Rochester's crisis is finally relieved and she also obtains equality with Rochester in property and identity, Jane Eyre returns to the manor. What Jane Eyre pursues is a kind of equal love.

In Thornfield Hall, Jane declares her independence and self-reliance to Mr. Rochester that although she has no financial and physical advantages, she is not soulless and heartless and she has as much soul and full heart as anyone. She loves Mr. Rochester not for his wealth and social status, but for his mind and temperament. Jane believes that women are glorious creatures as equal as men. When she talks to Mr. Rochester in the name of God, the custom, conventionalities, and mortal flesh are no longer existing, and their spirits are passing through the grave and standing at God's feet, equal as they used to be. This speech resembling flame burning, is Jane Eyre's declaration of love (Shirley T., 2022).

There are contradictions in Catherine's view of love. On the one hand, Catherine and Heathcliff fight against the oppression of class together, as allies to resist oppression, maintain spiritual fitness, and enjoy the real freedom and happiness of an unfettered life in a howling wilderness. It's like birds of a feather flocking together. Catherine and Heathcliff are similar in character. It can be seen that their emotional foundation is quite strong, and their love belongs to the love of nature, primitive love, spiritual love, and soulmate love.

On the other hand, the love between Catherine and Edgar Linton is to cater to the secular world, which maintains calmness and reasonable thinking and is undoubtedly the outcome of social secularity. According to Maslow, human needs form a hierarchical system, that is, the emergence of any kind of demand is to meet the premise of the lower level of demand, and people are animals with constant needs and demands. Catherine fulfills her need for safety and steps to a higher level of respect in the marriage with Linton. In the social environment at that time, Edgar Linton meets her requirements for respect for money and status (Takahashi, Mutsuko, 2023).

Catherine has rebelled against her nature in submitting to the world, betraying her own emotions, and falling into a web of her own making. The immediate cause of this tragedy of love is her vanity, ignorance, and foolishness, for which she has sacrificed her youth, love, and life, and Heathcliff. Catherine breaks the bond between marriage and love. Her tragedy of love is not only a personal tragedy but also a tragedy of the times (Wang Shunlai, 2020.).

5. Conclusion

The Victorian period contributed to the prosperity of literature and art, which formed the basis of the concept of equality between men and women. The Victorian women writers Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, Mrs. Gaskell, George Eliot, etc., were born at a time when the contradictions of nineteenth-century British capitalism were becoming increasingly acute. In their struggle for women's independence and freedom, they criticized the egoism of the bourgeoisie with literature creation as a weapon and showed some moral ethics with equality and the spirit of freedom.

Feminism elements have a great presence in the works of the Bronte Sisters. Despite their humble origins and ordinary appearance, Jane has strong characteristics, full of passion, fantasy, resistance, and perseverance. Jane Eyre has an invincible inner personality, which is also emphasized by feminism—independence and self-improvement. Besides, she has sober thinking and planning of her life and destiny, and a rational understanding of her character and pursuit, and a firm belief in her love and future. In the view of marriage, Jane Eyre shows her unyielding and unremitting process of freedom, which shows her pursuit and yearning for equality, and freedom and beautiful love.

In Wuthering Heights, the heroine Catherine and the protagonist Heathcliff's love, death, and separation constitute the mainline of the novel. In her short life, Catherine, a tragic character, is always full of contradictions and pain. Catherine represents Emily Bronte's yearning for ideal, pure Platonic love. In the Victorian period, the status of middle-class women was particularly pathetic. They could not find their social status and were in social values of the patriarchal system, as appendages of society and men. This is also the cause of Catherine's split of her personality in the contradictory and tortured spiritual world.

The feminism reflected in the Bronte Sisters' works in the Victorian period stimulated the awakening consciousness of lower-middle-class women in Britain and made them begin to pursue their rights. It laid the foundation for
the feminist movement in Europe and North America in the twentieth century and provided extensive thinking for the feminist trend of ideology later. The pursuit of women's independence is a long process. Women should be independent and self-reliant, not blindly trapped in fruitless passivity and vanity. Women should value personal dignity and regard mutual respect and equality as the premise and basis of love.

References


