

THE INDEPENDENT SPIRIT OF WOMEN IN CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S NOVELS

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Charlotte Brontë describes strong-spirited and independent women in her social novels. The research focuses on the story of one generation of brave women from the middle class whose mission is to achieve their liberation. The main aim is to point out the determination of their success and influence on modern European women who aim at independence in both the family and labour.

The literary images of the brave women are constructed through the prism of different disciplines (philology, sociology, economy, history).

Key words: independence, patriarchal mentality, protest, stereotype

Introduction

The Victorian Age (1837–1901) is characterized by dynamic social-economic and political processes. England achieves the peak of its power and economic development during this historical period. The Industrial Revolution affects a change in the old social structures. The prominent nineteenth-century English philosopher and social reformer John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) writes on the principles of reform of patriarchal society in his treatises. In his book *The Subjection of Women* (1869) he is a conceptual supporter of the equality of the two genders. The Victorian thinker's utilitarian ideas influence the tendencies of sophistication of the social structures in Europe, e.g., the establishment of the so-called “post-industrial society”.

The independent spirit of Victorian women rebels against the patriarchal constraints, dependencies and discrimination. The *Suffragettes'* movement appears whose aim is to fight for free election rights for women.

The English writer Charlotte Brontë lives and works during the Victorian Age. She does not participate in the *Suffragettes'* movement, and does not sign their petition for equal electoral rights. Charlotte Brontë

describes independent and strong-spirited Victorian women who aim to achieve their dignified position in society. The talented author supports the women's social cause in the sense that she lives in the literary images of her heroines, and together with them fights against the social stereotypes.

The research focuses on the history of one generation of brave women from the middle class whose mission is to achieve their freedom. The basic aim is to determine their success and influence on modern European women who aim at independence in both the family and in society.

And last, but not least, the modern interdisciplinary (multidisciplinary) method is used in the study. The brave women's literary images are constructed through the prism of different scientific fields (philology, sociology, economy, history) in the context of two remote historical periods – The Victorian Age and the digital twenty-first century. The new interdisciplinary method is a paradigm for a bridge between literary analysis and the social-economic sciences.

Frances's hidden protest in Charlotte Brontë's novel *The Professor*

Frances Henri chooses the teaching profession as her vocation. The discourse in the novel follows the heroine's professional development in a chronological sequence. She starts her life as a worker – mending Brussels lace. The poor orphan emigrates with her aunt from Switzerland, quickly finds her way in the business environment, and she manages to find a niche in the Belgian labour market.

Frances starts work as a teacher of embroidery at a pensionnat for girls, due to her basic knowledge and ability to mend the lace worn by all the ladies in Brussels. The unscrupulous and dishonest directress of the pensionnat for girls, Zoraide Reuter, dismisses the hard-working Frances. Yet, nothing can stop the heroine's aspiration to pursue her aim – to devote her life to the noble vocation of a teacher. The treacherous dismissal motivates Frances' firm decision to educate herself further. The young woman fills in the gaps in her philological knowledge owing to her hard work and perseverance. She manages to achieve her husband William Crimsworth's professional qualification (by contrast, he has a prestigious college education).

Patriarchal society generally underestimates women's professional abilities. Frances starts her job as a teacher of English with a lower salary in comparison to William, who is in the same position. This means that her contribution to the family budget is lower, and does not secure her financial material independence. That is why, the ambitious teacher does a

marketing research in the city, and due to her inherent entrepreneurial spirit, she makes a rational business plan for the opening up of her own school. The heroine becomes the owner of one of the most prestigious pensionnats in Belgium with the financial and moral support of her husband William.

Frances Henri and William Crimsworth's family is described in detail in the novel as a model for a successful marital union. Both Frances and William are good professionals at their jobs and, as a result, the school flourishes. Charlotte Brontë's biographer, Lyndall Gordon, adheres to the view that work and marriage could go hand in hand: "In this *The Professor* speaks past its own time and directly to ours, especially in its idea that work, marriage, and motherhood might be combined" (Gordon 1994: 129).

The marriage of Frances and William is a proof that, although their gender is different, women and men together could achieve something good both for themselves and the society as a whole.

The similar professional profile of the family of Zoraide Reuter, directress of the pensionnat for girls, and Francois Pelet, the owner of the pensionnat for boys, is used as an antipode to the marriage of Frances and William. The imperious and mercantile Zoraide turns her marriage into a business deal. She gets married to the older Pelet who is rich and with a social position. Zoraide's mercenary marriage is professionally successful. Yet, there is no love, happiness and spiritual harmony in her family. To sum up, it should be underlined that Frances' example not only motivates and inspires, but shows the path for the achievement of success. The message is that every average intelligent and practical woman could have her own business owing to honest labour.

The social protest of a governess in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*

Charlotte Brontë constructs the unforgettable image of the governess Jane Eyre. The heroine follows her own life course with confidence. She refutes the patriarchal barriers and conditions which marginalize the woman's social role, and subject her to the will of man.

Jane Eyre's strong and resolute character shows as early as her childhood when she defends herself alone against the terror of her cousin John. Later, the main heroine protests against the cruelties and injustices at the Victorian schools by protecting her meek and religious friend Helen Burns.

Jane Eyre aims to preserve her independence and superior principles. She does not accept Rochester's expensive presents. Patricia Beer explains

that Edward Rochester makes gifts to women with the aim “to buy” and “enslave” them (Beer 1974: 122).

Jane Eyre’s love declaration is revolutionary in the context of the ancient patriarchal tradition. Her demonstration of equality with Rochester seems unacceptable against the background of Victorian prejudices.

Jane’s sense of justice is stronger than her love. She does not betray her moral code, and declines Rochester’s proposal of a co-habitation without marriage. The governess does not compromise her dignity and secretly leaves Rochester’s estate with a risk to her life and without money or means of existence.

The governess rebels against the harems which are characteristic of some geographic regions. The whole nature of Jane Eyre rebels against the tyranny over women around the world: “I’ll be preparing myself to go out as a missionary to preach liberty to them that are enslaved – your harem inmates amongst the rest” (Brontë 1994a: 267).

The bold and honest governess takes off the mask of her cousin – the clergyman St John, and unveils the fact that he is severe and despotic. St John proposes to Jane a marriage without love, and a joint religious mission to India by using hypocritical phrases for a supreme Christian duty. The spirit of Christian meekness leaves Jane Eyre and she declines her cousin’s egoistical proposal of a loveless union:

I scorn your idea of love, I could not help saying as I rose up and stood up before him, leaving my back against the rock, I scorn the counterfeit sentiment you offer: yes, St John, and I scorn you when you offer it.

(Brontë 1994a: 403)

The woman’s aspiration to liberation against subjection is metaphorically illustrated by the burning up of Rochester’s estate by his mad wife Bertha. The feminist critics Gilbert and Gubar even call their book of literary criticism *The Madwoman in the Attic* – after this heroine. They view Bertha Mason as a victim of patriarchal society. According to the feminist critic Shoshana Felman the ban on women’s expression of their opinion is the reason for their madness (Eagleton 1996: 58).

Jane Eyre marries Rochester after the death of his mad wife. This matrimony is most widely discussed by the critics. Kate Millet looks for hidden reasons beneath the superficially conventional nature of the marriage, because Jane Eyre is not the conventional heroine from the traditional novels (Lodge 2009: 68). Helen Moglen considers this marriage a compromise because, in her opinion, Jane is going to carry out the role of a nurse and

mother to the disabled Rochester (Lodge 2009: 71). Jane Eyre herself declares before the wedding ceremony that: "I told you I am independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own mistress" (Brontë 1994a: 429).

It should be underlined that the most characteristic feature of the main heroine is her strong social position. She rebels against the patriarchal stereotypes which limit women's rights. Jane Eyre's strong and pure love wins and affects the readers even to this day.

The brave and freedom-loving Shirley in Charlotte Brontë's eponymous novel

Sons inherit and manage family companies according to the patriarchal tradition. The heroine in the novel *Shirley* is the one and only heiress to a big estate with a farm and a mill. Shirley's parents give her a male name because they do not have a son to inherit their property.

Since a very young age Shirley lives in the big inherited estate by herself, in spite of the protests of her uncle and guardian Mr Sympson. The main heroine manages the family mansion successfully owing to her personal merits – intellect, courage, independence, confidence and determination.

The active Shirley is either at the farm or at Robert Moore's office from morning till night. The young business lady is not interested in the secular chronic, but reads the leading articles instead. She usually follows both the financial information and the current foreign news. Shirley's image as a manager of an estate could be viewed as a personification of the idea of the self –realization of the woman in response to her real capacities.

Shirley gets acquainted and wins the trust of the most powerful men in the parish such as the clergyman Helstone and Mr Yorke. The business lady discusses the latest news with them. Shirley openly defends her male name by confidently declaring that she demands power:

You must choose me for your churchwarden, Mr Helstone, the next time you elect new ones. They ought to make me a magistrate and a captain of yeomanry. Tony Lumpkin's mother was a colonel and his aunt a justice of peace. Why shouldn't I be?

(Brontë 1993b: 153)

The so called "matchmaking" is very popular in the Victorian Age. The two contractors are men and the woman acts as "the exchange currency". The independent Shirley rebels against this patriarchal tradition which lowers the woman's dignity. Her uncle Mr Sympson has the strong wish to marry her off to someone, so that he would be free from his

obligations towards her as a guardian. A big verbal battle occurs between the rude and despotic Mr Sympson and his independent and rebellious niece. Shirley declines several marriage proposals, regardless of the candidates' wealth and social position. The brave niece opposes her uncle with strong determination. The battle itself finishes with Shirley's victory.

The self-reliant Shirley is horrified by the thought that she won't be her own self after the marriage, that is, she will not be free any more. Louis Moore wins his former student's brave heart with cleverness, tact and a lot of patience. Shirley sticks to her principle to choose her husband only with her heart and mind. Their marriage becomes possible only when Shirley lets herself be voluntarily "governed" by Louis Moore (Gilbert and Gubar 2000: 397).

The thesis that there are no impossible professions for women is defended through Shirley's spiritual and physical abilities shown through the workers' rebellion. This progressive idea reaches up to the present when women are soldiers, officers and even astronauts.

Lucy's business in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Villette*

The whole image of the independent and self-reliant Victorian woman is constructed in the novel *Villette*. In comparison to the rebel Jane Eyre and the brave Shirley, Lucy is reserved but with a brave spirit. Lucy Snowe has no relatives, friends, a home and material and financial means, yet she possesses common sense and dignity. When out of age, Lucy starts her own life only with the sole treasure of her abilities inside her and the ambitious aim to achieve independence. She is confronted with a life and death struggle. That is why Lucy compares her life by using the metaphor of war:

If life be a war, it seemed my destiny to conduct it single-handed. I pondered now how to break up my winter-quarters – to leave an encampment where food and forage failed. Perhaps, to effect this change, another pitched battle must be fought with fortune; if so, I had a mind to the encounter: too poor to lose, God might destine me to gain. But what road was open? – what plan available?

(Brontë 1993d: 277)

The discourse in the novel describes Lucy's battles for the overcoming of the social and religious barriers and the achievement of freedom and independence. She has no profession since she is another victim of the patriarchal educational system. The main heroine could work only as a governess with her education, yet not in her own country because she does not speak French. That is why, she leaves England and goes to

Belgium where she has to overcome a number of petty patriarchal prejudices and constraints. In the context of those, it is unacceptable for a woman to travel alone, stay at a hotel, eat at a restaurant or visit public cultural institutions – cinema, theatre, art galleries:

Foreigners say that it is only English girls who can thus be trusted to travel alone, and deep is their wonder at the daring confidence of English parents and guardians. As for the “jeunes Miss”, by some their intrepidity is pronounced masculine and “inconvenient”, others regard them as the passive victims of an educational and theological system which wantonly dispenses with proper “surveillance”

(Brontë 1993d: 46).

Lucy Snowe prefers sitting alone in a dark, secluded alley or reading at her desk till late at night, rather than embroidering and listening to other teachers' boring talks. It is at this time that she prepares her professional independence which is possible only at her own school, having in mind the hostile to women patriarchal social environment. Lucy makes a plan for action after asking her only true friend “Reason” for pieces of advice. Teaching is not her favourite profession. Yet, only this type of job grants a certain degree of independence to women in a patriarchal society.

Lucy receives a lucrative offer from the rich Mr Home de Bassompierre to become a companion to his daughter Polly in return for a very big salary and a luxury lodging. Yet, the freedom-loving Lucy declines without hesitation because

I could teach; I could give lessons; but to be either a private governess or a companion was unnatural to me. Rather than fill the former post in any great house, I would deliberately have taken a housemaid's place, bought a strong pair of gloves, swept bedrooms and staircases, and cleaned stoves and locks, in peace and independence. Rather than be a companion, I would have made shirts and starved.

(Brontë 1993d: 278)

There are many old maids in patriarchal times. The young girls who cannot be “saved” in marriage and become housewives, for a number of reasons, turn into victims of both society and religion. The brave Lucy is not afraid of the ghost of the nun, but she is horrified by both nuns and old maids' pointless and sad lives.

The woman's powerful energy of spirit is illustrated by the actress Vashti. She protests against the patriarchal barriers to women in art. Her unnaturally strong anger is metaphorically compared to the fire which is caused at the theatre. On the other hand, Lucy identifies herself with the

actress and is deeply immersed in the psychological power of the performance. The force of the fire is so strong that it could destroy the patriarchal barriers which hinder women's professional development. Being a man, Dr John fails to understand both Lucy and Vashti. Lucy is guided by her own aesthetic vision, and is not influenced by men's points of view.

The main heroine struggles with life, death, sorrow and fate all her life. Her cruelest battle is the last one when she has to confront both the social and religious dogmas which limit her independence. The mercantile union between Madame Beck and Pere Silas is established on the basis of common interests. Yet, none of them can crush Lucy's will and determination, and she finds the strength to continue following her life aim.

Lucy manages to win not only the life-and-death battle, but also the very war for a free and independent life. The main heroine manages to establish her own business. Lucy's story proves the idea that our individual abilities define our ways in life.

Conclusion

Charlotte Brontë is one of the prominent English writers. She creates unforgettable and true to life images in her novels. The message of the equality of the genders is important nowadays, too. Today, women's main demands are for an equal participation in the social, economic and political life and a just payment for their labour.

The comparison of generations of women who are remote in time is of major significance. The advanced ideas formulated in the study influence and inspire modern women who aim at freedom and independence to go ahead with confidence.

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