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THE STRUGGLE OF POWER AND PASSION IN WUTHERING HEIGHTS AND JANE EYRE




Natka JANKOVA*



Abstract: This paper covers the very common theme of conflict between power and passion in both mentioned novels introduced by two pairs who seek their balance in order to achieve happiness. We are aware that there are certain differences in the two main relationships presented in the two novels. Power is central in both novels and a balance of power is needed in both relationships to reach the love heaven. Jane Eyre and Rochester reach their balance and a happy ending, whereas in Wuthering Heights the unapproachable balance leads to destruction of both Cathy and Heathcliff. The conflicts depicted in these novels lead to happiness and power is often replaced by love, but the balance is different in each case. Jane Eyre has a happy ending while Wuthering Heights ends with the death of Heathcliff. The sisters, apparently, did not share the same reaction to Byronism. Gender was also an important domain in the Victorian age and in the novels of Emily and Charlotte Brontë. Their heroes and heroines kept the conventions and norms of their time but in Jane Eyre this adherence led to happiness, while in Wuthering Heights it resulted in destruction. In neither novel marriage is for the sake of status and wealth. It is described as conducive to love and happiness.

Key Word: power, passion, conflict, Victorian age, gender.



1. Introduction

The Victorian era had been an outstanding historical period full of changes in many different aspects. As the reign was a long period of

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prosperity for the British people, it is often characterized as a long period of economic, colonial and industrial consolidation although Britain was at war every year during this time. From the literary point of view it was a period of huge literary output. In a lot Victorian novels novelists confront similar issues such as the relationship between man and woman, society, manners, morals and money. Victorian novelists appear to have been preoccupied with social relation.

When it comes to gender issues, the accession of Victoria is seen by many critics and historians as a paradox. Back then, the female sex was deemed as the weaker one, always dependent and inferior to men. It was a time when all the decisions, political, economic, legal were taken by men, but the monarch herself, was pre-eminent to all men who were considered as her subjects.

2. Power and Passion

The theme of conflict between power and passion in both novels is introduced by two pairs who seek their balance in order to achieve happiness. It is clear that there are certain differences in the two main relationships presented in the two novels *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. Power is central in both novels and a balance of power is needed in both relationships to reach the love heaven. Jane Eyre and Rochester reach their balance and a happy ending, whereas in *Wuthering Heights* the unapproachable balance leads to destruction of both Cathy and Heathcliff. On one hand, as Jane Eyre says, "We're born to strive and endure"(Oldfield,1976:45) and according to her, it is superior to be a governess at school than being Rochester's mistress. On the other hand, in *Wuthering Heights*, the female protagonist Catherine decides to marry Edgar Linton in order to get a better and stronger position in the society. G.H. Lewes in a review made a point describing the nature of Catherine's love for Heathcliff as possessing "a passionate abandonment which sets culture, education, and the world, at defiance"(Lewes,1850:81). Actually from this passionate intensity arises the violence of action of all main incidents. Unrestrained emotion marks the last meeting between Heathcliff and Catherine.

Emily and Charlotte Brontë's evaluation of the relative importance of power and passion is fundamentally different. We cannot be sure whether Hareton and Cathy's quiet domestic love outweighs the wild, powerful passion of Heathcliff and Catherine. We do not know whether Heathcliff and Catherine achieve their private paradise despite their defiance of Christian principles. Emily's own stance seems to suggest her belief in a personal heaven, and certainly her vision of Heathcliff

and Catherine's desire to unite in blissful isolation has a more lasting impression than the vague sleepers in the quiet earth of the conventional point of view. Charlotte's heroine is totally ambiguous. She is governed by two forces, passion and power, and she must apply to an outside force for guidance at times when duty and emotion make contradictory claims. Sometimes her directive from the inner voice of conscience is to behave according to power as in her decision to take the post of village school mistress. Sometimes the expression of emotion is permissible, however, and then it is the right and wise thing for that circumstance, as in her longing to gain experience away from Lockwood and in her refusal of St. John's proposal.

3. Dominant Views of Gender during the Victorian Age

During the Victorian period, industrialization brought changes in the economy, the social structures and all previously common held views began to change as well. The emergence of girls' schools and colleges challenged the commonly held opinion that the proper sphere of women were not politics and publicity but private and domestic life. Despite all the opportunities for women to become more educated, many people did not want them to use their intelligence and capability because they feared they would lose their 'purity and innocence'. Charlotte and Emily Brontë were faced with these oppositions when writing their famous novels *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. According to G.H. Lewes a "woman's proper sphere of activity is elsewhere than writing. My idea of a perfect woman is one who can write but won't." (Lewes, 1850: 50) Charlotte Brontë herself admitted that because they had the impression that authoresses were liable to be looked with prejudice, they used the pseudonyms of Ellis and Currer Bell. Because of the fact that things were changing a lot during the Victorian age, it is very difficult to pinpoint the 'dominant view' on gender but, it could be said that the two pairs, i.e. Heathcliff and Catherine, Rochester and Jane Eyre, challenged the norms and conventions of their time. We are aware that there are certain differences in these two relationships whereas on the top of all is the 'balance', which leads to a happy ending in *Jane Eyre*, whereas in *Wuthering Heights* the unapproachable balance leads to destruction.

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In both novels, the main theme is the equal or in other words balanced relationship. In *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine dominates much of the novel through Heathcliff's undying love for her. In *Jane Eyre*, the heroine is set on marrying only with an 'equal' and for love. Catherine finds her equal in Heathcliff whom she meets while they are still chil-

dren. As Nelly Dean comments on Cathy, 'she had ways with her as I never saw a child take up before' (Brontë,1995: 36) and prior to Heathcliff's arrival, her request for a whip as a gift from her father is particularly interesting. This is commonly seen as a symbol of power where the whip represents masculinity in contrast with her brother, whose choice of present was a fiddle. While the gift choices would perhaps have been more apt reversed, so too would their reactions to the loss of the gifts. Hindley is driven to tears while Catherine "showed her humour by grinning and spitting at the stupid little thing"(Brontë,1995: 32) where she speaks about Heathcliff, and the reaction is not usual for a girl with "the bonniest eye, the sweetest smile and the lightest foot in the parish."(Brontë,1995: 36) Hindley, who is seven years old, shows a very 'feminine' reaction to the loss of the gift, while Catherine shows a frightening form of 'male' aggression; the grin suggests that she takes pleasure in her punishment.

4. Reversal of Gender Roles

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Many researchers have argued that the reversal of gender roles while Cathy and Heathcliff are still children is an attempt by Brontë to show that women and men are different intrinsically because of the simple fact they are male and female. The classically beautiful appearance of Catherine enhances this; she is ideally feminine on the outside but a brutish man on the inside. Later on in the novel Catherine comments "I am Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being."(Brontë,1995: 73), which some have taken to mean, like in her early life, through this equality, Catherine is made masculine. Heathcliff is never referred to as 'Mr' or 'Master' and Heathcliff acts as both his first name and surname. Therefore, considering the violent nature of Heathcliff with the idea that he is 'feminine', one could ascertain that Brontë is saying that females can be violent too and full of rage, just like Hindley was full of 'female' emotion.

To a lesser extent this is shown by the behaviour of Jane Eyre. As a girl she is undeniably brave and strong for her age, though through the first person narrator we are able to see the underlying fear that we cannot see in Catherine. We can feel her sadness and need to be loved though she faces exclusion from the family initially and others throughout her life; "she really must exclude me from privileges intended only for contented, happy little children."(Brontë,1995: 3) It is in the bad treatment that Jane receives at the hands of her cousin that many see a comment on the rights of the dominant male gender. De-

spite being detestable, Master Reed would inherit the family fortune; as John himself says, "I'll teach you to rummage my book-shelves: for they are mine; all the house belongs to me, or will do in a few years"(Brontë,1988: 7) while Jane, a naturally loving and good child, would be penniless. It is because of this early injustice, one can assume, that Jane's key need becomes the search for equality. Jane is told by Bessie: "not to think yourself on an equality with the Mrs. Reed and Master Reed... They will have a great deal of money and you will have none" (Brontë,1988: 9) which appears to resonate in the older Jane as she famously proclaims:

...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 restraint, 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. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex (Brontë,1988: 55).

While she is strong against those who forsake her, she is 'soft' to those who love her. She gets in to fight against Master Reed but when she is shown love and friendship at Lowood, she cries and embraces a friend through her death. It seems that throughout her life, Jane doesn't know what sphere she belongs to; she loves Rochester but does not want to be seen as his wife but rather as his equal and likewise, despite her affection for Adele, she never seems to take any real joy in teaching her or other children, for that matter. She does not have the maternal instinct that women are supposed to have. In spite of this, critics tend to agree that through Jane, Brontë wrote effectively about the treatment of women in her society.

The Victorian audience would obviously have been aware of what was expected of the characters in the novels. Jane's expectations are demonstrated through Miss Temple, the pleasant, young, intelligent teacher from Lowood School. The teacher marries a good clergyman and moves away to his new parish, and this is similar to the proposal set forth to Jane by St John. When Jane turns down this sensible proposal as she does not love the man or he her, it could be argued that the expectations of both men and women are being challenged by Brontë. It is apparent that St John has deep feelings for Rosamond Oli-

ver, a beautiful, rich and good-natured woman but she is not such a suitable match for him as Jane, a teacher and a relatively poor woman: 'I want a wife: the sole helpmeet I can influence efficiently in life, and retain absolutely till death' (Brontë, 1988: 432), something Jane definitely is not after her flight from Thornfield Hall. St John conforms to the expectations set for him while Jane decides to go against them. Rochester sees his match in Jane too: "my bride is here...because my equal is here, and my likeness" (Brontë, 1988: 269) deliberately putting the rich and beautiful Miss Blanche Ingram off him for the plainer governess. Looking at the character of Blanche, the reader can see that she is not a likeable character. Nor does Rochester love her. She is the typical caricature of a rich, beautiful and talented yet highly unlovable literary character. She follows the convention of her class, to marry for wealth and status and because of that she seems unable to love and be loved in return. Brontë is arguing through this that no love can exist in such situations, a sentiment echoed in the self-conscious Victorian society: "Alas! Our age is not a marrying age; and, therefore, I fear it is an unholy one: neither our young men nor our young maidens honestly fall in love and marry now-a-days" (Ritchie, 2008: 134).

While Jane appears to be emotionally more sensible than Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*, it is interesting to note that Cathy becomes almost the antithesis of Jane in her decision of marriage. Choosing money and well-suited connections over the man she loves, she comments "It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now'spurring Heathcliff to run away before hearing her continue 'but because he's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same.'" (Brontë, 1995: 71). According to W.A. Craik, "Catherine clearly does understand her duties and is not unprincipled. She does not want Heathcliff as a lover in any usual sense: indeed, the physical attraction she feels is to the comely and eligible young Linton." (Craik, 1968: 17) "Catherine deems that Linton's soul is as different from hers 'as a moonbeam from lighting, or frost from fire'" (Brontë, 1988: 71). And while she was always a healthy, lively child, after conforming to what was expected of her and marrying Linton, she becomes sick, and eventually perished. It seems it was Cathy's fate to die; she did what convention asked rather than what she really yearned for. Those who stick to the conventions seem to perish in the walls of *Wuthering Heights*; Frances, Hindley's perfect example of a conventional wife, is a sickly woman upon entering the house and dies soon after. Some argue this to be a deliberate attack on the aforementioned marriage ideals of wealth and class. Though Cathy the elder who perishes, her spirit re-

mains trapped at Wuthering Heights which some take as a symbol of death in oneself through denying natural wants. It has long been an argument that a woman ceases to have her own personality when she is married, some argue that Brontë could have sympathized with this; the death of the personality therefore represented in the physical deaths of the characters. The ghosts at Wuthering Heights appear only to stop their haunt once the younger Catherine marries Hareton, righting the wrong of her mother and Heathcliff's separation.

Rather than a portrait of herself as 'model of Victorian femininity', Charlotte Brontë, firstly questions the apparent inequality of males and females through her literary work. Jane comments "women feel just as men feel" (Brontë, 1988: 114) and devices such as St. John Rivers' denial of his love in order to meet what is expected of him gives him the same predicament as a female where she is faced with the power of her husband in the place of God. Gender boundaries are broken down as Jane's long-wanted equal is found in broad, manly Rochester. Similarly, in *Wuthering Heights*, Emily destroys the normal conventions of gender; a beautiful girl originally has the mind of a man while a rugged looking man has no position in society and therefore becomes female. Both novels show what different character lives are expected to lead and the effect that these expectations can have. In short, it appears that both authoresses are saying not that all men and women are equal, but some can be. The idea that woman's "intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision" (Veeder, 1983: 81). All this is challenged by the strong women in both the novels.

5. Conclusion

The conflicts depicted in the two novels lead to happiness and power is often replaced by love, but the balance is different in each case. *Jane Eyre* has a happy ending while *Wuthering Heights* ends with the death of Heathcliff. The sisters, apparently, did not share the same reaction to Byronism and their Byronic heroes were not the same. Gender was an important domain in the Victorian age and as explained above in the novels of Emily and Charlotte Brontë too. Their heroes and heroines kept the conventions and norms of their time but in *Jane Eyre* this adherence led to happiness, while in *Wuthering Heights* it resulted in destruction. In neither novel is marriage for the sake of status and wealth represented as conducive to love and happiness. The two novels have been seen as prime examples of female gothic by some feminist critics, exploring woman's entrapment within domestic space, her subjection

to patriarchal authority and her attempts to escape such restrictions. Charlotte's Jane Eyre and Emily's Cathy are typical examples of female protagonists in such a role.

It is clear that both Charlotte and Emily were so worried about the women's role in the Victorian society and succeeded in creating a new man, a man who would suit the new-emerged Victorian woman. A man who would love his woman for what she is, for her freedom and for her wish to be successful, self-confident and self-sufficient. The new image of the Victorian woman who is supposed to be very different than the former image as explained in an essay written by Peter Gaskell in 1833:

The moral influence of women upon man's character and domestic happiness, is mainly attributable to her natural and instinctive habits. Her love, her tenderness, her affectionate solicitude for his comfort and enjoyment, her devotedness, her unwearying care, her maternal fondness, her conjugal attractions, exercise a most ennobling impression upon his nature, and do more towards making him a good husband, a good father, and a useful citizen, than all the dogmas of political economy" (Poovey, 1988: 8)

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From all things mentioned and argued above, it can be summed up that Brontë sisters were thinking in a very visionary way for their time because throughout history and many years after, things with women and their role in society has changed and nowadays women are present in every aspect of life. The Victorian Era saw many changes in terms of social philosophy and gender relations. It was a time of shift from patriarchal pattern of male supremacy to female dependency or in other words towards new modern concepts of equality.

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