

## Bronte, Trollope and Collins' Heroine Characterizations and Their Views on Victorian Women

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### Abstract

By looking at how authors characterize their characters in novels, by analyzing how authors make their characters talk, behave, think, we can catch a glimpse of how they think of their characters, as well as a specific social group those characters represent. In this paper, we will focus on Charlotte Bronte, Anthony Trollope and Wilkie Collins' different views on their heroines' nature and on Victorian women's nature in general by extension, based on their different heroine characterizations and their usages of language to do so in *Jane Eyre*, *Barchester Towers* and *The Woman in White*. Generally, this paper reaches the conclusion that Bronte hopes Victorian women be affectionate and independent; Collins hopes them be innocent and submissive, while Trollope rejects female conformity, and views them as varied and multifaceted individuals.

**Key words:** *Jane Eyre*; *Barchester Towers*; *The Woman in White*; Heroine characterizations; Victorian novels

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### INTRODUCTION

Generally, I hold the view that *Jane Eyre* is unconventionally passionate, rebellious; *Laura Fairlie* is conventionally innocent, vulnerable; *Eleanor Bold* is both conventionally upright and unconventionally strong-

minded. However, no matter how different those heroines are from each other, they all try to revolt oppressions from Victorian society toward their individuality and passions.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In characterizing female characters in a novel, using of language to show how they speak, feel and behave plays an essential part, and analyzing it closely in order to get general ideas about the authors' attitudes towards female nature, from part to the whole, is therefore necessary. In following passages, we will discuss the characterizations of *Jane Eyre*, *Laura Fairlie* and *Eleanor Bold*.

### ANALYSIS OF TEXT

*Jane Eyre* is passionate and rebellious. In her childhood, when bullied by her cousin and treated unfairly by her aunt, she feels a strong sense of injustice in her reason, and her immediate intention is to fight back. Compared with *Helen Burns* who chooses to endure oppression, *Jane* resists it; she denounces *Mrs. Reed* as being deceitful and pitiless, speaking very directly to her that she will never call her aunt again; that she is bad, hard-hearted. Thus, *Jane's* soul "began to expand, to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph" (Bronte, 2008, p. 37). For *Jane*, to revolt *Mrs. Reed* is actually a realization of self-affirmation, a completed process of affirming her individuality. When her soul expands and exults, her mind becomes more extensive, and she feels elation when she successfully and freely expresses herself. This is an intense passion; *Jane* calls it "strange", maybe because she never experiences it before, as she is raised in a harsh environment without any care or love from close-relatives. As a result, to express passions is part of her nature; she should dislike and resist, as naturally as she should love.

Not only does character *Jane* express her emotions freely, but narrator *Jane*, who knows what is going to

happen, also writes in a direct way when character Jane is expressing emotions. Character Jane is very honest with her feelings; when she sees Rochester on the party, she admits she is strongly attached to him, meanwhile narrator Jane also writes agitatedly that her eyes were drawn involuntarily to his face (Bronte, 2008, p. 174). At this time, her sensibility completely overwhelms her reason, and she accepts her emotions frankly. Later on she writes: "While I breathe and think, I must love him." (Bronte, 2008, p. 176) Breathing is an involuntary action, and thinking is a voluntary action; by mentioning both of them Jane probably means she will both involuntarily and voluntarily love him. And she must love, because she thinks love is necessary to happen, as she considers it as another form of self-affirmation.

Narrator Jane is also very passionate about her feelings, just as character Jane. When making the famous speech to Rochester to confess, she writes: "Do you think I am an automaton? —a machine without feelings? ...Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless?" (Bronte, 2008, p. 253) Here narrator Jane uses bicolon with anaphora, in which the two rhetorical questions have the same pattern "do you", to leave a deep impression on both Rochester and reader, and thus to strengthen the passionate mood. She asks "do you think", instead of stating "I am", because she strongly agrees with her free and passionate personality; she wants Rochester to not only agree with but also proactively speak out that he affirms her personality. Just as Jane resists oppression towards individuality in her childhood, she now resists oppression towards emotions, and declares her love, saying she also has sensibility as a female; she demands equality and respect.

Later on, after Rochester accepts her love and she returns to her room because of the storm, narrator Jane writes:

But Joy soon effaced every other feeling; and loud as the wind blew, near and deep as the thunder crashed, fierce and frequent as the lightning gleamed, cataract-like as the rain fell during a storm of two hours' duration, I experienced no fear, and little awe. (Bronte, 2008, p. 256)

The narrator uses parallelism and analogy mostly to compare her strong feelings to powerful weather phenomena, such as wind, thunder, lightning, and storm, and refers to multiple sensations, including vision, hearing and feeling, at the same time. Using of lots of adjectives leaves us the impression that those weather phenomena, as well as Jane's emotions, are very intense and contagious. Again, her sensibility overwhelms reason, as she feels nothing else but excited and joyful. And she is not ashamed or fear of her passions, as later on the housekeeper Mrs. Fairfax expects her to be; she perceives them as indispensable components of humanity.

The heroine Laura Fairlie in *The Woman in White* is a conventional Victorian idealized female, who is obedient, pure, innocent and vulnerable. She requires herself to

obey female moral constraint, both in individual and in marriage. Individually, although she wants others to treat her like a responsible being (Collins, 2008, p. 250), her dependence on others is palpable every time when an accident happens; she clings to Marian in Blackwater Park when she is continually being suppressed by Percival and Fosco; when Marian is down with illness, she is with Mrs. Michelson all the time, seeking for support and help; after she is deprived of her property and identity she is always under Marian and Walter's protection.

Unlike Jane, Laura suppresses her feelings and emotions. She carefully keeps her intentions undisclosed, and tries to remain self-possessed all the time, which is a significant trait required for women in Victoria era. When Walter bids her farewell, she is "strangely quiet and pale"; this shows she is trying very hard to suppress her misery. And when he is about to leave, she "sank into a chair, as her arms fell on the table, as her fair head dropped on them wearily (Collins, 2008, p. 127)." The frequent using of negative verbs, such as sink, fall, drop, shows she is negatively acting to Walter's leaving; she does not speak as Walter does, because speeches may give away her sadness; she does not dare to stand up, to look at him, to face with his departure; she is both physically and mentally weak, and shrieks from her sad feelings. After he has gone she puts the book of his drawing secretly under her pillow as a treasure; and since then she asks frequently if there is any letter arriving, without mentioning his name; she misses him secretly. She does not want her emotions to overwhelm her reason, because thus she might lose self-possession; as a noblewoman, she wants to look decent, and decent women are expected to be continent.

As to marriage, she thinks conventionally that the bond between husband and wife is sacred and unbreakable, and the option is always on the husband's side. Before she marries she indeed has the right to claim the release, but she leaves the discretion entirely to her fiancé. She says to Percival:

"If you leave me, you only allow me to remain a single woman for the rest of my life. My fault towards you has begun and ended in my own thoughts. It can never go any farther." □Collins, 2008, p. 172)

We can tell she does not want to keep the engagement since she loves another man, but her speech shows no personal opinion; the subject is Percival: he can leave her, but she cannot leave him, because she is not supposed to be initiative. Besides, it seems to her that remaining single forever is apparently not a big deal, comparing to Percival's reputation; and even this "insignificant" matter should carry out with her fiancé's permission. She considers her passions as faults that are inappropriate to start, wise to stop; she is fear of her passions, and ends them determinedly, partly because they may overtake her self-possession, partly because she feels she is obligated to take the responsibility of a wife, which means being

honest and loyal to her husband. Interestingly, she says in the beginning “if you..., you only...” which indicates she is trying to induce Percival to leave her, though in a very slight effort.

The heroine Eleanor Bold in *Barchester Towers* has both conventional and unconventional Victorian female traits. On one hand, she is kind and upright; she defends Mr. Slope from being isolated by his political opponent, her brother-in-law, even though she personally dislikes him; on the other hand, she is strong-minded and active. When being forced to respond to Mr. Slope’s artificial confession, which she abhors, Eleanor looks directly at him cavalierly, “in a manner that ought to have frozen him” (Trollope, 2014, p. 324), and says that she does not have a feeling for him. Unlike Laura, she dares to confront directly with a man who is physically stronger than her, and take apparent actions to show he makes her uncomfortable; later on she slaps on his face when he intends to move closer, saying she will never speak to him again. When describing this dramatic scene, Trollope writes:

“As it was, the provocation was too much for her, the temptation to instant resentment of the result too strong. She was too keen in the feeling of independence, a feeling dangerous for a young woman, but one in which her position peculiarly tempted her to indulge.” (Trollope, 2014, p. 327)

As a Victorian woman, she has high moral integrity; she performs duties of a mother and daughter very well, and cannot bear Mr. Slope’s constant frivolous behaviors toward her. Like Jane, she resists them, rather than endure them. Similarly, her emotions overwhelm reason, and she takes rather violent actions to defend herself. She is keen to feel independent, maybe because she constantly feels it, after her husband dies and she has no one to depend on; we may infer from this that Eleanor had a conventional marriage in which she played the role of a dutiful wife and mother; and she desires independence, a quality not expected in married women. In noble family, as Eleanor is, those moral norms are strictly obeyed, so she is peculiarly tempted to indulge in independence. Trollope calls these uncontrollable feelings dangerous temptations; maybe he thinks traditionally passions are bad for Victorian noblewomen, maybe he is using irony. Yet it is possible to come to the conclusion that Eleanor Bold has traits that Victorian society both expects and does not expect women to have; and she obeys moral norms but tries to break them at the same time.

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## OBSERVATIONS

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From Bronte, Collins, Trollope’s characterizations of their heroines, we can catch a glimpse of their general ideas about what a woman should be by extension. By creating Jane Eyre, an unconventionally affectionate and assertive female, Bronte challenges 19th-century Victorian conceptions of appropriate female behaviors. She thinks

that women should be passionate and strong-minded; she hopes they be honest with their emotions, and express them freely. This kind of desire is indicated in many places of the novel: Jane escapes from Gateshead where she is deprived of susceptibility, and leaves Lowood where she is deprived of personality; she confesses love to Rochester directly before he does, and is not ashamed of their inequality in positions, as Mrs. Fairfax expects her to be; she leaves Rochester because her self-esteem is hurt, and comes back to him as she is honest with her feelings at last. Jane is always challenging Victorian conventions for women from society, and she meets many people who, whether they have good intentions or not, try to pull her back into the “right” track, including Mrs. Reed, Mr. Brocklehurst, Helen Burns, Mrs. Fairfax, St. John, etc. Yet she still manages to choose the life she wants to live, as a free and passionate human-being, after a long period of self-doubt and struggle.

By creating the conventionally obedient, vulnerable and virtuous heroine Laura Fairlie, Collins portrays the ideal Victorian woman in his mind; the passive Laura reflects the prevailing expectation that women should be pure, submissive and obedient. Laura is in passivity and obedience almost all the time; she is always physically weak and constantly ill (Collins, 2008, p. 33, 301, 365, 392, 488); she moves inactively, whether from one place to another or within one place; in many occasions she simply obeys others: she obeys her father’s will to marry Percival, even she does not want to; she leaves her property issue entirely to Mr. Gilmore (p. 136); she asks others for advice and support whenever an accident happens (p. 164, 251, 279, 374, 397). Laura in the whole novel is presented as an ideal of Victorian womanhood: obedient, respectful of social conventions, and willing to sacrifice her own wishes for others. Therefore, unlike Jane, she is cherished and respected by most people; they take great risks to help re-establish her identity. Interestingly, though she is an idealized character and is willing to sacrifice, she still has desires and tries to achieve them by challenging conventions (for example, she persuades Percival to release her; she refuses to stay overnight in Fosco’s house), though with ultimate failure. This may show Collins thinks women should be innocent and unassertive, while he objectively acknowledges the possibility that women have their own intentions.

Trollope thinks very neutrally in womanhood, however, as he creates Eleanor Bold, a heroine with both expected and unexpected traits in Victorian society; in the whole book we can frequently observe both of them. Trollope portrays her as a dutiful wife and daughter (Trollope, 2014, p. 51), but she is not willing to obey her brother-in-law’s illiberal requirements as expected (p. 231); she is upright in being kind to Mr. Slope whose opinions differ from her (p. 225), yet dejects him fiercely instead of enduring when he insults her (p. 326); she is passive and bashful being with Mr. Arabin (p. 314), but confesses her love first to him in

courage, though indirectly (p. 395). Those two kinds of seemingly opposite characteristics are not contradictory on Eleanor; instead, they make her multifaceted, and attracting. She has relatively high and stable status in the book, therefore she seldom battles; but as an affectionate female, she sometimes also acts to resist oppressions from society, as she quarrels with Dr. Grantly about her being friendly to his political opponent; she ungracefully slaps on Mr. Slope's face; she passionately grasps Mr. Arabin's arm, and confesses her love. By creating Eleanor, Trollope thinks women should not be stereotyped simply as "masculine" or "feminine"; sometimes they are in the middle, or share qualities from both sides.

It is worth noting that despite of distinct differences in their personalities, all three heroines try to push back against Victorian conventions, but they either fail, or reach a certain degree of compromise with society eventually. Jane takes great courage to ignore the status gap to be in love with Rochester, yet the key factor that they finally get together is Bertha's death; Laura tries to persuade Percival to release her since she wants to be honest with her feelings, and she fails; Eleanor refuses to obey Dr. Grantly's illiberal requirements, and they reconcile in the end mainly because she marries a man that shares same political opinions with Dr. Grantly.

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## CONCLUSIONS

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In conclusion, heroine characterizations to some extent can reflect the author's beliefs and expectations; and

the characterizations of Jane Eyre, Laura Fairlie and Eleanor Bold in a way show distinctly Bronte, Collins and Trollope's opinions towards women's nature: Bronte hopes them be affectionate and independent; Collins hopes them be innocent and submissive; Trollope rejects female conformity, and views them as varied and multifaceted individuals. Yet all of them portray how their heroines fight against social constraints on their personalities and sentiments, and their consequences, which are quite ironic, of doing that. Today we still show solicitude for oppressions and persistence of female personality; there are still many cases today in which a woman is not expected to be in love with a man whose status does not match hers; there are still many cases today in which a woman has no options for choosing who to marry; there are still many cases today in which a woman is considered as the appendant of a man and has no freedom of speech and thought. Today many of us still undergo these situations, as Jane, Laura, Eleanor experience in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; that may be the reason why today these novels still resonate.

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