

CHRISTIANITY IN CHARLOTTE BRONTE'S *JANE EYRE*

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Abstract

With the application of the renowned Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye's theory of archetype, the author in this paper attempts to analyze various characters in Bronte's novel Jane Eyre, such as Jane Eyre, Mr. Rochester, Helen Burns, St. John Rivers, and Mr. Brocklehurst in terms of Biblical archetype, to reveal the Christianity in it, and to probe into Charlotte Bronte's perspective on Christianity. It is hoped that this paper will be of any help to Chinese readers to appreciate this novel in a new way.

Keywords: Biblical archetype, characters, Jane Eyre, Christianity.

Introduction

Since its publication in October 1847, *Jane Eyre* has been widely read and studied as one of the famous classics in the nineteenth century. Accordingly, a host of readers and critics try to read and reread it from different angles either on the basis of literary criticism or by their keen perceptions. In recent years, many critics have been inclined to read *Jane Eyre* as a feminist novel. By interpreting Jane's independent personality and persistent struggle with male figures in a patriarchal world, they assert that *Jane Eyre* embodies the ideal of feminism, which proclaims that women are born to be equal with men and encourages women to achieve their independence and freedom by subverting the patriarchy and establishing a new world for themselves. There are various approaches applied by those critics to unscramble *Jane Eyre*, however, there is hardly any attempt to reread this work from the perspective of Christianity. The author of this paper is trying to reread this work as a religious novel mainly based on Northrop Frye's theory of archetype to reveal the Christianity in it and to probe into Charlotte Bronte's perspective on Christianity.

It is believed that the Bible is the great code which unlocks the secret of western literature and culture. The Bible is one of the two pillars (the other is Greek culture) of western literature which accumulates its rich cultural heritage. Most western authors are influenced by it consciously or unconsciously.

The influence makes no exception of Charlotte Bronte (1816-1855), a nineteenth century British female writer. Bronte was a daughter of an Irish Protestant and a Methodist. Living in an isolated country house, she was taught by her father most of the time. Just being a child, she took particular interest in the Bible. Her father once recalled the childhood of Charlotte, "I then asked Charlotte what was the best book in the world, she answered, 'The Bible.'" (Gaskell, Ch.III) After her mother died, her mother's sister Miss Branwell who was a Methodist as well came to supervise the house. Due to the religious background of her family, Charlotte "held to Christian ethics or the like". (Glen, P20) Thus, her literary imagination was nurtured by the Bible a great deal. In her masterpiece *Jane Eyre*, there are more than forty allusions cited from the Bible. So this paper will mainly focus on Christianity in *Jane Eyre*.

1. Northrop Frye's Theory of Archetype

The term "archetype" can be traced to Plato ("arche" means "original"; "typos" means "form" or "pattern"). From the Greek for "original pattern", archetype is a basic model from which copies are made. However, the concept gained currency in the theories of Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961). According to Jung, archetype means "a primordial image, a part of the collective unconscious, the psychic residue of numberless experiences of the same kind, and thus part of the inherited response-pattern of the race". (Zhu, P129-130) When we apply his theories to literature, we engage in archetype criticism. Unquestionably, the foremost archetype critic of the twentieth century is Northrop Frye (1912-1991). For Frye, an archetype is "a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one's literary experience". (www.library & www.press) His great works, such as *The Secular Scripture* (1976), *The Great Code* (1982), and *Words with Power* (1990) all center on the study of the Bible. In Frye's system, the organizing principles that give literature coherence and structure are derived from the archetypal image found in the Bible and the myths of ancient Greece. Divorcing a text from its social history, Frye maintains that there "exists an overall structure or mythic development that can explain the structure and significance of all texts." (Bressler, P155) Archetypal criticism focuses on characters, images, symbols, metaphors, plots, events and themes. This paper attempts to use the theory to analyze the characters in *Jane Eyre* in terms of Biblical archetype to reveal Christianity in it and to probe into Charlotte Bronte's perspective on Christianity.

2. Character Analysis

2.1 Jane Eyre

Jane Eyre, the heroine of the novel, has quite complicated life experiences which are like Israelites running away from Egypt where they are slaves to the "promised land"-----Canaan where they will have a new free happy life. Jane, a penniless orphan, is escaping from sufferings and temptations all the way, starting from Gateshead Hall to Lowood, and to Thornfield, and to Moor House, at last she arrives at her "Canaan"----the Ferdean Manor.

Jane resides as an alien in her aunt's house and Israelites are aliens in the land of Egypt. Jane is excluded by the Reeds and always receives harsh and unsympathetic treatment. In the loveless atmosphere she tastes bitterness, solitude, apathy and humiliation which resembles the ordeals Israelites experience under the control of Pharaoh.

The cruel punishment in the red room reaches to the climax of Jane's sufferings in Gateshead. Then Mr. Lloyd, a good apothecary who plays a vital role in Jane's leaving comes to her rescue. Israelites find their life as slaves in Egypt unbearable, so they "groaned and cried out", and "their cry for help rose up to God" (Exodus 2:23), so Moses is the very person God selects to save them.

Jane then leaves Gateshead Hall just as Israelites run away from the land of Egypt. However, her long expedition to happy has just started. Just as when Israelites leave Egypt, they take pains to march along on "the roundabout way of the wilderness". (Exodus 13:18)

Jane is sent to Lowood Institution, namely, an Orphan Asylum, where privations and starvation are prevalent among young teenagers. Fortunately, Miss Temple, a loving tutor and Helen Burns, a constant fellow guide her by precept and example so that Jane could be able to get through the harsh days in Lowood. Miss Temple and Helen just act as the "pillar of Cloud" and the "pillar of Fire" which "lead Israelites along the way by day" and "give them light by night". (Exodus 13:21)

After eight years in Lowood, Jane obtains a post as governess at Thornfield Hall where she falls in love with her master Rochester. After the abortive wedding, Rochester still asks Jane to live with him. For Jane who is orphaned at infancy and gets no care and love except Mr. Rochester, it is really difficult to refuse the proposal and leave Rochester. This desperate dilemma is like the Red Sea Israelites encounter on the way to Canaan. The Red Sea seems too vast to overcome. However, with the faith in God and flaming desire for freedom, Israelites cross the Red Sea successfully. So does Jane. She turns naturally to God, "Be not far from me, for trouble is near: there is none to help." (Bronte, P278)

After nearly perishing on the moors, Jane finds herself taken in by a zealous minister John Rivers. Confronted with John's earnest proposal, Jane undergoes great inner struggles whose obstacle resembles the River Jordan that lies between terrible wilderness and wonderful Canaan. The call from Rochester releases Jane from John's influence just as God's call and promise help Israelites cross Jordan. Jane returns to Rochester in Ferdean Manor and they get married, which resembles Israelites' happy settlement in Canaan.

2.2 Mr. Rochester

Rochester, the hero of the novel, is the very image of Saul of Tarsus in the New Testament, who is a converted sinner and persecutor of Christians.

Both the two live in sin for a time. Rochester is involved in a disastrous marriage in which he has been acutely distressed by his insane wife. In despair and rage, he starts to try a life of dissipation which he takes for granted and never becomes conscious of his sin. Saul (later named Paul), the great Christian missionary in the Bible, has once a sinner in God's eyes. Not only does he reject the Gospel, but also persecutes the apostles and believers. "Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison". (Acts 8:3)

Both of them experience blindness and converts to Christianity. Rochester is "forced to pass through the valley of the shadow of death" (Bronte, P418). After Jane leaves him, his mad wife sets fire to Thornfield and he becomes blind and crippled. In such misery, he begins to see and acknowledge God's power and experiences remorse and repentance, "I did wrong: I would have sullied my innocent flower---breathed guilt on its purity..." (Bronte, P418). Rochester's conversion to Christianity has the striking likeness with that of Saul. Disaster comes suddenly and unexpectedly. On the way to Damascus where he decides to bring

the believers bound to Jerusalem, he is knocked to the ground by God and loses his sight. In blindness, Saul realizes the power of the Lord and believes in Him. He is then sent to Tarsus where he starts his missionary work.

2.3 Helen Burns

Helen Burns is obviously the image of Jesus Christ.

This precocious girl who espouses Christian doctrine seems closer to God than any of her evangelical teachers. She is patient, forgiving, loving and faithful, which is like that of Christ.

Helen is patient and never complains about the plight and the people around her, for she believes that "it could be your duty to bear it, if you could not avoid it; it is weak and silly to say you cannot bear what it is your fate to be required to bear" (Bronte, P48). Jesus is sent to save sinners and he is willing to endure in this harsh world before he accomplishes his mission.

Helen tends to forgive people who maltreat her, which is so extraordinary that it's almost divine, and which we can see in Jesus Christ.

Helen keeps love in her bosom. To Mr. Brocklehurst and Miss Scatcherd, she sees their good sides. To Miss Temple, her heart swells with gratitude. To Jane, she is willing to be her constant friend and her elder sister. She tries to instill the doctrines into Jane just as Jesus sees sinners. He helps them, curses them and tells them "the good news".

Helen is a soul with great faith. On her deathbed Helen speaks with Jane about her deep affinity with God. "I reply implicitly on his power, and confide wholly in his goodness: I count the hours till that eventful one arrives which shall restore me to him, reveal him to me" (Bronte, P73). We can view her death as a sacrifice because it teaches Jane a powerful lesson in faith. Her tombstone reads: "Resurgam", which means "I shall rise again", confirming her status as a Christ figure, as well as foreshadowing Christ's second coming.

2.4 Saint John Rivers

Saint John Rivers is the image of Saint John the Divine, the zealous writer of the Book of Revelation, the final and apocalyptic book of the Bible.

Just like that faithful Saint John the Divine, John Rivers devotes all he has to God, without concerning about any secular matters. He proposes to Jane who he does not love only because he thinks that she is fit to be a missionary's wife. He decides to leave for India only because he thinks in there he could be able to glorify the Lord his God.

The final reading before evening prayers, the last ever attended by Jane under the same roof as John Rivers is from the Book of Revelation, Chapter 31: It is the showing of the New Jerusalem, and so powerful is John Rivers reading of it that Jane almost succumbs to his request for marriage. The final words of the novel are of a letter written to Jane by Saint John Rivers. They are the last words to be found in the Bible----the final verse of the Book of Revelation of Saint John the Divine.

2.5 Mr. Brocklehurst

Mr. Brocklehurst is just like the Pharisee who behaves as religious teachers of Jews but in heart is hypocritical.

He shows off his contribution to the Orphan Asylum and boasts of his good will to cultivate the girls just like Pharisees's pursuit of vanity, "they love to have the place of hour at banquets and the best seats in the Synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi". (Matthew 23:6-7)

Mr. Brocklehurst is giving a wonderful speech on the plainness of clothing when his wife and daughters come into the classroom dressed as pompous as peacocks. He is as hypocritical as Pharisees, for they "do not practice what they teach" and they "clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence." (Matthew 23:3, 25)

3. Charlotte Bronte's Perspective on Christianity

Through the analysis of the main characters of the novel in the light of archetypal criticism, we can discover the author's preference to her characters and her perspective on Christianity. Bronte attaches her emphasis on the cynical sinners Jane and Rochester who have obvious human weaknesses and are not religious believers at first. In spite of that, it is not safe to assert that Bronte attack religious faith itself, just as she wrote, "Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last. To pluck to the mask from the face of Pharisee, is not to lift an impious hand to the Crown of Thorns." (Bronte, P3)

In fact, Miss Temple, Helen Burns, Saint John Rivers and even Jane herself have very strong religious belief, yet their approaches to faith differ. Saint John Rivers is fanatic and totalitarian, Helen frustratingly martyr-like, Miss Temple kind and gentle, Jane troubled but persevering. It is easy to condemn Brocklehurst's religious doctrine, but Bronte also undermines Helen and John Rivers' absolute and self-abnegating religious beliefs which advocate the total depravity of humanity. Helen and John Rivers seek happiness in Heaven; Jane is determined to find hers here on Earth. The way the inhabitants of Bronte's book deal with the theological convictions is closely entwined with their identities. To her, religion is alive and very influential in people's lives and souls. One could also discern that Bronte's opinion concerning the misinterpretation of religious ideals and the loss of true spirituality as a result of extremism.

Bronte wrote with a sense of mission. Indeed, Bronte's first biographer, Mrs. Gaskell, recalled being told by her that she always wrote "with a sense"----sinners can also be saved. In *Jane Eyre*, this sense burns through almost every page: "I...prayed in my way----a different way to St. John, but effective in its own fashion..." (Bronte, P393). Then, the novel *Jane Eyre*, regardless of personal predilection, is one that should at least be considered amongst religious works.

Conclusion

Christianity plays a very important role in Charlotte Bronte's writing which inevitably influences greatly the portraiture of characters in *Jane Eyre*. The author of this paper intends to interpret this novel in the light of Christianity rather than anti-Christianity and feminism in order to show a new outlook of it. Christianity is an indispensable part of western cultures and an important element in *Jane Eyre*, yet most Chinese readers

are not familiar with it. So the author of this paper hopes to help Chinese readers appreciate it better by informing them more about Christianity in it.

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