

# The Image of Women in the Nineteenth Century

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## Abstract

This essay focuses on the image of women in the nineteenth century specially the Image of low middle –class females and the way they were presented and judged. It also discusses the progress from silence to speech in the novels with a special focus on the progress of speech of the female protagonists in two nineteenth century novels which are Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857). Studying these novels gives a clear image of women in that era and how they were presented and treated; it also shows how different authors can give different images according to their gender and the role they play in society.

**Keywords:** Image of Women, Nineteenth Century, Bildungsroman Romance, Gothic Fiction, Social Criticism

## I Introduction

The researcher chose two novels to analyse, Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857). These novels were chosen for this essay because they fit the aims of it in so many ways. First of all, both novels represent parts of their authors’ lives from their points of view. For example, *Jane Eyre’s* subtitle is *An Autobiography* and Flaubert once said "Madame Bovary, that’s me". Second, the flow of actions in both novels is controlled by the social statuses of the main female characters. Thirdly, in *Jane Eyre*, Bronte represent women in that age from her own point of view as a female, on the other hand, Flaubert represents the female’s society in the 19th century from his own point of view as a male. Finally, the speeches of the main characters play an important role in representing the inner psyche of the female as well as the boundaries that the 19th century imposed among women at that time.

Studying the genres of these novels, it is observed that Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* represents more than one genre which are: Bildungsroman Romance and Gothic fiction as well as representing a social criticism. Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* also represents more than one genre but most importantly it represents realism and modernism by mocking romanticism. The use of more than one genre helps the author in presenting the main points that were at their time and the break of old kinds of literature.

## II- Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*: Social and Feminist Reading

To start with, as it was difficult for women to get an education, Bronte’s passion and love for education gave her the chance to educate herself and get education from the classroom and later work as a governess. Her childhood experience is reflected in her four novels (*The Professor*, *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *Villette*) it shows how much Bronte thought highly about education as a kind of salvation in the life of any female

(Lonoff, 2001:458)<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=7332f401-ca1d-4b14-9f6c-53b5a74e83f0%40sessionmgr115&vid=4&hid=123> . For example, *Jane Eyre* educated herself through reading by her own from the books at her aunt’s house and later by going to the Lowood School. The following quotation shows how difficult it was for *Jane Eyre* to educate herself from the very beginning; these difficulties were not only her own but also the difficulties of any socially poor female in the nineteenth century.

“What were you doing behind the curtain? He asked. I was reading. Show the book. I returned to the window and fetched it thence. You have no business to take our books; you are a dependent, mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen’s children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mama’s expense. Now, I’ll teach you to rummage my

bookshelves: for they are mine; all the house belongs to me, or will do in a few years. Go and stand by the door, out of the way of the mirror and the windows.”(Bronte,2007: 5)

Away from the difficulties in education, women in the nineteenth century encountered many more difficulties in their lives such as being treated as inferior to men. As the quotation shows; John Reed is treating not only Jane but also his own sisters as inferior to him. Although he has two sisters, John doesn't count them and already decided that his father's belongings should go directly to him. This fact draws the attention to another dark point about the treatment of females in general no matter what social class they belong to.

Bronte is presenting the suffrage of an oppressed girl who is seeking love and care and who tries to form and show her own personality from the very beginning of the novel. Although treated so badly as Miss Abbot tells her that she is: “less than a servant, for you do nothing for your keep.”, Eyre doesn't give up and change from silence to speech showing what Kaplan calls “feminist resistance and liberation”. Throughout the novel, Eyre has always been ordered to obey and keep silence specially when she argues and tries to show her personality as a human who have the right to choose and speak. As an example, in chapter two, Jane's aunt punishes her by staying in the red room and Jane's normal attempts as a child to get out of there only made her punishment worse. (Kaplan, 1996)

“O aunt! Have pity! Forgive me! I cannot endure it—let me be punished some other way! I shall be killed if— Silence! This violence is all most repulsive:” and so, no doubt, she felt it. I was a precocious actress in her eyes; she sincerely looked on me as a compound of virulent passions, mean spirit, and dangerous duplicity.” Jane speaks as the narrator showing what could possibly be the image of poor females. This image has also been presented when Hannah the housekeeper refused to give Jane Eyre a shelter. Although Hannah judged Jane harshly according to what she does not have not as a human and does ask for Jane's forgiveness after knowing more about her, Jane did argue that true Christian would never treat poverty as a crime specially that so many important people started and shined out of poverty (Benvenuto, 1972).

What made *Jane Eyre* very famous is the structural way that Bronte uses and the way in which the heroine always ends every conflict by a “triumph of integrity “. Bronte uses throughout the novel many structure methods that help in making the reading of the novel very interesting such as: foreshadowing, the paralleled actions, the opposite characters and the use of binary oppositions “contrasts of characters “. As an example on each method, Jane helps Rochester at the beginning of the novel and which foreshadows their gathering at the end of the novel. As for the paralleled actions, the first punishment of Jane Eyre which was staying in the red room and later in the novel Jane stays with the wounded Mason. Finally, the use of the opposite characters such as: the Reed sisters and the Rivers sisters.(Eric Solomen, 1963: 216)

According to Janet H. Freeman, Eyre did move from the state of silence to speech. Jane started to explore her own experiences into words, words of her own to reflect the reality of Jane Eyre not what people say that Jane is, the expressions that Jan used to hear throughout the novel from judgments and descriptions are exactly how a poor or low middle-class woman were judge in that century. Bronte did present her life in a way that no one can challenge since it is her own life which is best expressed by her words.

The life of Jane Eyre, as presented by the words of Bronte, contained many struggles and showed how life is difficult for a low middle-class woman. Besides all the difficulties that Eyre faced she did express her victories in every way possible, Jane's first victory was not a victory of a physical action but a victory of words-battle between her and Mrs Reed in which she is always asked to keep silence but in a moment of rage out of the suffocating oppression that Jane experienced she did make her speech showing how she really feels about her oppressor Mrs Reed. “I was left there alone—winner of the field. It was the hardest battle I had fought, and the first victory I had gained: I stood awhile on the rug, where Mr Brocklehurst had stood, and I enjoyed my conqueror's solitude.”

From a general view, Jane looks like the colonized and other factors in the novel are the colonizers, not only Mrs Reed but also Mr Brocklehurst and huge parts of the society. In this relationship between the colonizer and the colonized Jane fears her own victory for moments, a feeling which emerged from the fear of the oppressor although, the oppressed can be in so many ways stronger than the oppressor if they broke the psychological doors that stand between them and the truth.

What Jane calls a victory shows how simple the oppressed Jane was. Nineteenth century low middle-class women were not treated as complete humans (as shown in the novel) which is why Bronte wanted to be successful and to establish her own school. As a result of the degradation that Bronte faced as a student and later

as a governess, she became creative in expressing a case of social criticism of the nineteenth century by writing *Jane Eyre*. (Higonnet, 1996)

Jane's speech has progressed in a notable way, looking at the beginning of the novel when Jane obeyed and kept silent and when she wanted to always be in the shade, or the thought that not only she has but also many from her class just like Mrs Fairfax who tried to teach Jane some of the upper-class manners has; mentioning the fact that she will not be noticed anyway "You must go into the drawing-room while it is empty, before the ladies leave the dinner-table; choose your seat in any quiet nook you like... just let Mr Rochester see you are there and then slip away—nobody will notice you." (Bronte, 2007: XVII)

Jane's perspective of life has changed by the end of the novel; she did shape her own aspects of life and refused to be controlled by any powers especially when it comes to the male society. Jane went back to Mr Rochester after making sure that she is equal to him in all aspects. She even reached the stage of being independent after being treated like less than a servant as she was not independent in any way. The power that she has to go back to Mr Rochester and tell him that she became an independent person shows the huge progress in her life.

A progress that can be count as imaginary and a dramatic change in her life that is accompanied with the change in her speeches and thoughts are the main factor in making this novel a romantic one. Jane fought the Idea of the superior man and against the Victorian thoughts about the ideal woman, in one of her speeches, Jane calls whomever thinks that women are only good for housework and entertainments "narrow minded" and calls for equality because" 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 you do not lie dead" Rochester asks" in some ditch under some stream? And you are not a pining outcast amongst strangers? No, sir! I am an independent woman now. Independent! What do you mean, Jane? My uncle in Madeira is dead, and he left me five thousand pounds." An independent woman, because of money, could have her own house if she wants to. Jane's own house, only the thought of it, is something that is finally going to make her visible in that society. It shows how powerful a person can be with money. Her social critique is right from a romantic point of view; it is agreed that people's humanity should not be judged according to what they have but according to what they give. It also shows that being a female does not decrease from humanity. The success of *Jane Eyre* represent the success of Bronte as a low-middle class female who educated herself to achieve what she wants in life.

Summing up the life of *Jane Eyre* sums a quite clear image about women in the Victorian age except, Jane refused to take that role and created a role of her own. Although she tried her best to change her situation in life, a realistic reading of *Jane Eyre* would show that Eyre was lucky as a character in a romantic novel. If *Jane Eyre* was written later the ending would probably be a very sad ending in which Jane's uncle would have died a drunken man and left all his debts to Jane to deal with. Using my limited creativity, I believe Jane would have two choices: one is to work really hard all her life trying to free herself until she gives up and suicide which is a weak option since Jane is presented as a strong warrior who will not take a defeat as an answer. Another choice is to marry either St. Johns or any rich man who will free her from her debt but takes away her freedom as a complete human.

### III- Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*: Social and Feminist Reading

*Madame Bovary* is a novel that also represents the situation of women in the nineteenth century, women who were yet not treated as they should be. *Madame Bovary* represents women in the Victorian age and how they should fit the perfect image that the society drew for them; being housewives with no voice of their own and obeying their husbands as a higher power that control them and provides living for them. The novel is also a critique of the bourgeoisie, as professor Fairlie says in her book *Flaubert: Madame Bovary* (1962), "what exasperates him in the bourgeoisie is not principally vulgarity or plain stupidity, but the bland, self-satisfied, unquestioning certainty that confines complex human experience in tabloid maxims and deforming platitudes."

The fact that this novel is very important is because it is one of the first novels that represent reality and mock romanticism and because it is one of the first modern novels. Stephin Heath starts his book about Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1992) by the famous sayings that addressed *Madame Bovary*; Zola, for example, saw the novel as "the code of the new art" and Robbe-Grillet saw it as "*a nouveau roman* before its time". It tells

a story about a young girl who mixed reality with the romance books that she used to read. She created a fantasy world that she wanted to find in reality. The dissatisfaction of her marriage, Heath says, is Flaubert's dissatisfaction of the world. She searched for the perfect image of love by having love affairs outside the marriage. She wanted to always fulfill her desires if not by love, by materials and money and when she faced the ugly truth about reality she preferred to suicide.

Having mentioned modernity, why is *Madame Bovary* a modern novel? And in what ways Madame Bovary has been a turning point in the history of novels? These questions have been raised and answered by Peter Lang's book *The Originality of Madame Bovary*. Lang raises many points in his book discussing the fact that although Flaubert refused to be subscribed under the category of Realists and Naturalist because "they were insufficiently concerned with the creation of beauty."(p93), Madame Bovary is a realist novel.

Flaubert spent five years composing his masterpiece as he cared for every little detail in every single sentence. Flaubert prioritized work over his own life since he used to work in his room with the door locked to make Madame Bovary as perfect as could be. Flaubert said in one of his notes about Madame Bovary: "what a damned profession! What an infernal obsession!" (5 March 1853, C). He also once said in 28<sup>th</sup> of November, 1852 that he spent four days in writing only one very good paper which he destroyed because it is out of place. (Heath, 1992)

Flaubert started his novel with a description about Charles Bovary that shows how "heavy and limited" he is. Giving this description gives clear hints about his personality and he will be acting as a husband later on, he does everything without learning or progressing in his life. (Various, 2004) "In vain did he listen; he understood nothing whatsoever, he simply could not get his head round it. But even so he worked; he kept bound notebook. He attended every lecture; he never missed a hospital visit. He completed his modest daily task after the fashion of a mill horse, plodding round and round blindfolded, unaware of what he is grinding." (Charlotte,2007:1.11).

Flaubert was charmed by Mademoiselle Rouault and his mother could notice that. Questioning why Charles would keep going back to that place even though his job is completed draws the attention to Charles' crush on Emma. People have been judging her in all means according to her life and the past of her family" their grandfather was a shepherd, and they've a cousin who nearly got taken to court for some dirty trick he got up to..." Emma's appearance like a "countess" does not reflect her reality, it reflects her needs to fulfill the perfect image she has in mind and which has been shaped from reading romance books.

After marriage, Emma discovered that what she is living in is not enough to satisfy the image in her mind. She wanted to look for real love and true passion which she could not find with her husband. Flaubert like Emma and the Bovary should act in a certain way according to their social class and their dreams and expectations should be limited to what they have or what they possibly might have, for this reason elder Madame Bovary does not really like her daughter-in-law as Emma's imagination has no limits and she acts in life according to what she always wanted to have. Flaubert shows the reader how Emma is thinking with almost no remarkable argument or speech that is made by her. Until she starts imagining her life with another man, Emma's situation in life only allows her to accept what she is and walk the same direction that her life walks in, or at least that is what is expected from her as a female.

A dilemma that many women had at that age and even until our days. A woman is capable of making a relationship the major action in her life, in the case of Emma she is looking for someone "superior" to give values for her existence as she by herself is not able to change her reality which is things that she cannot find in her husband who is a misfortune flat character. Flaubert is criticizing the bourgeois by his protagonist Emma. It is believed that Emma represents the bourgeois that she hates. "The bourgeois directs all his efforts towards profiteering in the practical world; Emma is equally logical and restricted in her emotional profiteering. Both lack the two qualities that value the artist's vision: a capacity to share imaginatively in an experience other than their own."(Fairlie, 1962: 42)

As mentioned earlier, Emma is now longing for a new life, a life in which she can be treated differently and be valued for what she has. Experiencing love with different people and failing the attempts to address her imaginary romantic ideas into real life should have taught her the lesson that things in real life are not perfect reflections to what is in our minds, it also should have led her to question her extreme thoughts about love and passion. Emma does not only refuses the reality that she cannot find real love or passion but also she refuses her motherhood and treats it as another reality that she cannot accept.(Corrigan ,2010)

Flaubert has focused on the style of his novel so much, which is the reason behind the long time that it took to be completed. From his style, Flaubert is showing few moments of romance that finally fade away turn in a noticeable way into tragic serious falls. For example, when Charles and Emma first got married; the description of how Charles treats Emma and how he cannot wait to go back home to see her would give the reader fake hints that this marriage might be a happy one. Emma's description that she can well manage her house would have given an indication that she is a kind of woman who would save her house not only by keeping it clean but also by keeping her relation and family connected.

"Furthermore, Emma knew how to run her house. She sent Charles's patients details of what they owed in nicely phrased letters that did not sound like bills. When they invited a neighbor to dinner on a Sunday she would make a point of providing some special dish; she knew how to arrange plums in a pyramid on vine leaves, how to serve pots of fruit preserve turned out onto a plate, and she even spoke of buying finger bowls for use at dessert. All this helped Charles reputation greatly."(Flaubert, 2004:38)

Studying this quotation, Emma, at the beginning of her marriage could handle living with Charles because she thought that she loved him. Emma also thought that he could provide for her all that she needs from love, care and material things. At the beginning, Charles reputation is praised because he helped Emma's father in getting better after breaking his leg. Emma's father used to address Charles whenever he sees him by "his savior"

Women in the nineteenth century were not treated equally; instead they were treated as upper class servants and objects to their husbands. Looking at Anna Karenina thinking of the possibility of having a husband like hers in that age, which is something very possible, raises the question about who should be the blamed in Emma's story. In some situations, Emma showed how close to perfection she can be if she got what she wants to or even hoping that she might get what she wants to. Most critics and readers believe that Emma is the blamed and is criticized for being so materialistic, careless about her duties as a wife and a mother, adultery as well as causing the destruction of her family by her selfishness and the debts that she could never be freed from.

Madame Bovary chose a wrong attitude to deal with her situation as a middle-class female who have unlimited goals and thoughts in her mind in which she always dreamed to fulfill. It would have been legitimate for her to have great expectations and dreams if she was a male or rich and it would be perfect if she was both. The seriousness of her actions that are caused by mixing reality with romance has caused a dramatic destruction to her life and the lives of innocent people just like her daughter and husband. Committing suicide has only added more black points to her life.

Flaubert decided to show the reader the story from the narrator's point of view and according to Lang,2002 in his book *The Originality of Madame Bovary* he explained the shifted point of views starting with the schoolboy and finally ending with Emma's point of view until she takes away her life. These shifts in the point of view help in so many ways. Starting with the help in narrowing the information that the reader receive according to the point of view or to draw the reader's attention to another. This can be seen at the night of the wedding in which the story has been told mainly from the guests' point of view to keep some privacy for Charles and his new wife. This technique also helps in engaging the reader with the inner thoughts of almost all the characters in the novel which forces the reader to share these character's thoughts and be active toward them.

Lang also explains another advantage of the narrative technique that Flaubert used which is the "production of unspoken drama through the juxtaposition of two conflicting points of view." For example, the moment that occurred when both Emma and Charles were side to side after the incident of Hippolyte's club foot each having their own thoughts. Lang continues commenting on this example by saying : "Emma and Charles are both reacting to the same event, but while both have perhaps some justification, both are wrong, and the narrator is careful to abstain from arbitrating between them."(p. 53)

#### **IV- Conclusion:**

Spotting the light on few aspects of women's life in the nineteenth century it is observed that as their lives were not as happy as they wanted it to be and since that century people started to educate themselves and be more liberated, women chose their own ways to deal with their situations. Either being angels and dedicated to their husbands and the society in general or to try to get what she wants either by being a very intelligent women whom her good luck played a big role in her life just like Jane Eyre, or to be a woman who is trying to escape dullness and the low-standard life using her beauty and materialism which are a superficial but yet highly important in that age as slightly important in our age. Madame Bovary , for example , did use her beauty to try

and satisfy her needs and since her education is limited and highly focused on artificial and musical aspects she trembles with the changes of normal life as it is not as perfect as she wants it to be.

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