

On the Heroine's Character in *Jane Eyre*

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I begin with summarizing the story of *Jane Eyre*.

The heroine, Jane Eyre, lost her parents and is looked after by her relatives, the Reeds, at Gateshead Hall. But Mr. Reed, who is her blood relative, has already died. Therefore Jane is brought up by Mrs. Reed, but she dislikes and treats Jane coldly. Mrs. Reed's children treat her coldly, too. Jane disobeys them and makes self-assertion. For that reason she is sent to Lowood Institution. This is a charity-school and all the girls are wearing simple clothes and the meals are very miserable there. Then Jane meets a girl whose name is Helen Burns. Unlike Jane who has a violent and passionate temper, Helen is calm and intelligent. Soon Jane is fascinated by her and becomes friends, but Helen dies by a disease before long.

Jane lives in Lowood until she becomes eighteen years old, then leaves for Thornfield Hall to do a new job as a governess to a little girl whose name is Adèle. The girl and Mrs. Fairfax live there, but the master of the Hall, Mr. Edward Rochester, seldom comes back. One day a few months later, while Jane is taking a walk to a post office, she runs into Mr. Rochester who is on his way home. Though he is older than she by twenty years and is hard to please, she gradually comes to be charmed by him. But when she hears about his marriage with another woman, she is disappointed. One day, she hears that Mrs. Reed has a serious illness and desires to see her, and she goes to Gateshead. When she sees Mrs. Reed, she learns that another uncle of hers is still alive and wants to give her his whole possession at his death. Before long Mrs. Reed dies and Jane returns to Thornfield.

One day when Jane is taking a walk in the orchard, Mr. Rochester calls her to stop and talks about his marriage. At the time Jane, thinking that he is talking about another woman, says unconsciously that it is very sad to leave Thornfield. But she has been mistaken, and he proposes to her. Although at first she doubts his words, she understands that he loves her truly. She decides to marry him. But on the day of the wedding a man says that this marriage cannot come into existence. The man says that Mr. Rochester has a wife whose name is Bertha Mason. The ceremony is called off halfway and the man's statement turns out true. Jane thinks that she cannot stay at Thornfield any longer and leaves with great pain. And in her wandering, she becomes penniless.

After she has walked around looking for a job for two days, she finds her way to a house. She asks an old woman if she could stay there overnight, but she is

refused. However, the resident of the house, Rev. St. John Rivers, comes back and shows her in. St. John's two sisters, Diana and Mary, and the old woman are in the house. She is nursed for a while and gets well. Then she has a job as a teacher found by St. John and moves into a new house. One day she learns that her uncle died leaving a rich legacy to her, and that St. John and Diana and Mary Rivers are her first cousins. She is glad to share the legacy among them. After that she is proposed by St. John and asked to go to India with him. She refuses to marry him, but consents to go to India to help his missionary work, when she hears Mr. Rochester's voice calling her from nowhere.

The next day she leaves for Thornfield and sees the ruined Hall. The Hall is burned down by the fire and Bertha is dead. Mr. Rochester is stone-blind, and has his one arm lost. And now he is in the manor-house of Ferndean. Jane goes there and meets him again. Then they understand that their hearts are not changed. Soon they marry and live happily ever after.

When *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847, it drew public attention as a remarkable literary work and at the same time became a target of severe criticism. For this novel implied revolts and protests against conservative literary tradition and social common sense which were the main streams in the Victorian England. In those days patriarchy was the fundamental system in England. So it was thought natural that women should be subject to men. And women's political and social rights were not permitted. But the heroine of the novel, Jane Eyre, aspires to become independent and confesses her love to the hero passionately. Her character is quite different from those of general women in those days. Therefore *Jane Eyre* was criticized as a novel not to be read. On the other hand, it received much estimation as a literary work. It describes woman's strong emotions excellently in the form of first person narration of the heroine, which was remarkable at the time. Now I want to consider about Jane Eyre's character.

While Jane is with the Reeds she often clashes with them. For example, when John Reed cries that all these things belong to him and throws a book at Jane, she objects and grapples with him. When she is forced to go to the red-room as a punishment, she resists violently. When Mrs. Reed tells John not to go near her, Jane declares that they are not fit to associate with her. Mrs. Reed has great difficulty in handling Jane and asks Mr. Brocklehurst to take her to Lowood Institution. After that Jane says to herself: "*Speak* I must: I had been trodden on severely, and *must* turn," (p.68)¹ and objects violently. At that time she feels "a taste of the power of speech and a brief sensation of victory."² She is the last person to keep silent when she is treated cruelly and wrongly. When she is so treated she thinks she must stop it. She says to Helen whom she knows in Lowood as follows: "When we are struck at without a reason, we should strike back again

very hard; I am sure we should —so hard as to teach the person who struck us never to do it again. . . .I must dislike those who, whatever I do to please them, persist in disliking me; I must resist those who punish me unjustly.’” (p.90) Jane resists all of the treatings which she feels unjust, and vents her violent feelings. Then Jane becomes eighteen years old and, unsatisfied with the job as a teacher in Lowood, goes out to the outer world for a new job. She gets a job as a governess in Thornfield Hall, but soon she comes to feel something lacking in the quiet life there and says to herself: “It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity: they must have action . . . Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for her faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do.” (p.141) Jane looks for some exciting life and vast world and aspires to become independent economically. She considers that such a thought is not unnatural but natural. When she decides to do something, she sometimes follows her feelings and thoughts ignoring the social common sense. Margaret Howard Blom says as follows: “Ultimately, Jane solves her problem by acting upon her selfish decision that contrary to the dictates of society and the teaching of religion, her own needs must be satisfied. In the context of Jane’s account, this decision is justified by the desperate nature of her situation.”³ Blom defends Jane Eyre from the point of her social situation. That is right. But surely Jane would have behaved as she did if she had been in any other circumstances. For that is her character.

Next I want to state about Jane’s way of thinking about love in connection with her character. She says to Helen in Lowood: “[T]o gain some real affection from you, or Miss Temple, or any other whom I truly love, I would willingly submit to have the bone of my arm broken, or to let a bull toss me, or to stand behind a kicking horse, and let it dash its hoof at my chest.’” (p.101) These words of hers show clearly her passionate temper and strong resolution undefeated by any obstacles. Jane was in terror and loneliness when she was with the Reeds. Only when a complete stranger was with the Reeds, she felt relieved and assured of her safety. She has grown up without affection. I guess that is why she longs for affection so much. Margaret Howard Blom says as follows: “Filled with this sense of the self standing alone and poised above a gulf of nothingness, Jane frantically seeks to unite herself with some other being through love.”⁴

Jane works as a governess in the Thornfield Hall and gradually comes to be charmed by Mr. Rochester. But she hears that he is about to marry some other woman. She thinks she must go out from there. Therefore she tells Mr. Rochester about that, but he says that she must stay. At the time she says unconsciously: “Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? . . .Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless?” (p.281) Jane tells him her thought openly. She does not keep in her mind the feeling of loneliness

which is due to the leaving from Mr. Rochester. Moreover, she tells the feeling of her own accord. She is not a quiet woman.

Now I want to consider about Jane's another aspect. She gradually comes to consider Mr. Rochester to be intelligent, full of vigor, sincere and earnest. Then she learns that he loves her and she feels the greatest happiness. Soon Mr. Rochester becomes her whole world. Nothing can take the place of him with her. But on the day of their wedding, it turns out that Mr. Rochester has already married and has a wife. Then she says to herself about Mr. Rochester: "I would not say he had betrayed me; but the attribute of stainless truth was gone from his idea, and from his presence I must go." (p.324) Mr. Rochester does not seem a sincere person as Jane thought. That is why, though Jane loves Mr. Rochester really, she thinks she must go. Even though to do so is painful like death to her. At first she thinks that she cannot leave him and it is intolerable. But a voice within her avers that she can do it. A conflict rises in her mind and she is troubled very much. Then a voice within her says: "[Y]ou shall tear yourself away, none shall help you: you shall yourself pluck out your right eye; yourself cut off your right hand: your heart shall be the victim, and you the priest to transfix it." (p.325) With her passionate and strong resolution she sacrifices her heart and decides to leave him. For she wants to protect her own innocence. She thinks that she has to respect social and moral conventions. So she decides that she cannot marry Mr. Rochester who has a wife and stay at Thornfield any longer. And she advises him to live sinless from now on.

When St. John asks Jane to marry him and to go to India to help his missionary work, she refuses him. Because she thinks that his proposal does not come from his love of her, but because he regards her as a right person as his partner. So Jane refuses his proposal. For she thinks that she cannot marry without love; besides to be with St. John who is rational and cool means that she must suppress herself. It is nothing but restraint to her. To go to India is also very hard for her and it seems to mean to hasten her death. That is why she refuses his proposal. Then he says that she is afraid of herself. She answers: "I am. God did not give me my life to throw away." (p.439) For, as Terry Eagleton observes, to a person like Jane who is alienated socially, her only property is her own self.⁵ She cannot send herself to a dangerous place without any attempt of resistance. She is an orphan and does not possess anything except her own self, which is her whole property. So she takes care of herself. Such a thought makes her refuse St. John's proposal, though she agrees, at the end of their conversation, to accompany him to India without marriage.

And it is the same with Mr. Rochester. When she parts from Mr. Rochester, her mind wavers and inclines to decide to be with him. But then she says to herself: "I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by

man.' " (p.344) She becomes very anxious about her own self being threatened which is her only property. For example, to disgrace herself and to send herself to a dangerous place and so on. And she seeks the way of no stain and safety. She wishes to keep herself innocent and to accomplish the rightness. She has a passionate temper and strong self-assertion, though she has an aspect restrained socially and morally. Yet she aspires for liberty and independence. After she has passed in Lowood Institution until eighteen years old, she becomes suddenly tired of her life there. She thinks something is lacking in her life there. For example, she feels much deprived by school rules and school habits and so on. She desires liberty. She desires change and stimulus. For a long time the world to her has been only Lowood Institution. She has no communication with the Reeds and the outer world. She feels that the life there is not enough. And she wants a new place, new faces and new circumstances. So she leaves Lowood. She cannot be satisfied with a quite passive existence there.

And she does not like to dress up above her place. When she is about to marry Mr. Rochester, he wants to give her many presents. But Jane says that jewels for her sound unnatural and strange. Then she receives a rich legacy from her uncle and now she is in circumstances which make it unnecessary for her to work. So she could live comfortably if she were to live alone. But at the end she marries Mr. Rochester who has become blind. And this time it is not Mr. Rochester who proposed her, but Jane herself. She declared her love for him and positively wanted to marry him in spite of his blindness, or because of his blindness. There we can see Jane's passionate temper and strong self-assertion. She dislikes to be a woman who is just a decoration to a man. She aspires to stand on an equal footing with a man.

Although this novel was against the common sense of those days, it caused tremendous popularity. It was an unusual and new love story to the readers in those days. Rosemarie Bodenheimer says as follow: "Conventional characters think of their lives as conventional stories; in this way they are effectively deprived of inner reality. Against that world of social and narrative convention, Jane devotes herself to the notion of originality, which becomes, in her hands, a moral attribute".⁶ In the circumstances of that patriarchal Victorian Age, Jane lived against the conventional society and common sense, but she lived truly obeying her inner self, her passionate and innocent self-assertive inner self. And her passionate temper and strong self-assertion were earnestly welcomed by some of the readers. They are described excellently in the form of first person narration of the heroine. And Jane's thoughts and feelings are delineated thoroughly and frankly. For example, the anger and indignation which Jane feels to the Reeds, those who are unfair in her childhood, and the affection for Mr. Rochester who is different from her in social standing and property and so on. The passionate temper and strong self-assertion of woman approvingly described were very fresh in those days.

By the way the author of the novel, Charlotte Brontë, is said to have been rather awkward when faced with the real world. That is why *The Professor* which she tried to write realistically was a failure. Sakiko Nakamura observes that describing the real world exactly was her weak point and it prevented her creativity.⁷ But *Jane Eyre* was written by her thirst for creation coming from inside. And Charlotte put in it all her own passionate feelings and thoughts and self-assertive ego which were her essentials as with her heroine in the novel. So *Jane Eyre* is described very lively and successfully.

Notes

1. All quotations are from *Jane Eyre*, ed. Q. D. Leavis (Penguin Books, 1847).
2. Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Brontës*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), p.157.
3. Margaret Howard Blom, *Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Sylvia E. Bowman (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), p.87.
4. Blom, p.90.
5. Terry Eagleton, *Myth of Power: a Marxist Study of the Brontës*. Translated into Japanese by Youichi Ohashi (Tokyo: Shoubun-Sha, 1990), p.79.
6. *Bodenheimer*, p.161.
7. S. Nakamura, *The Brontës* (Tokyo: Sangatsu Shobou, 1988), p.164.

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