

# *Jane Eyre*: “Improper” Sphere for a Victorian Woman Writer

Li Xiaojie

## **Abstract:**

*Jane Eyre*, tracing a woman’s extraordinary progress through life in the patriarchal society, caused a sensation in contemporary London literary society at the time of publication and brought Charlotte Brontë immediate fame. However, in its early reviews, *Jane Eyre* was deemed improper and was even defamed by some of Charlotte Brontë’s contemporaries in terms of its subject matter, the language and its “subversive tendency” (Poovey, 1988), particularly in light of the author’s gender. This paper explains the cause of the defamation of *Jane Eyre* by tracing the historical, social and cultural background of Victorian times. Through exploring Victorian woman’s social status, the patriarchal criterion of an ideal Victorian woman, and the Victorians’ expectation about a woman writer’s appropriate writing that reflects the virtues of an ideal Victorian woman, it is possible to understand the inevitability of Brontë’s defamation. To Charlotte Brontë’s contemporaries, the image of Jane Eyre was too much unlike “the Angel in the House”, namely the domestic feminine ideal that the Victorians extolled (Pan, 2003), which explains the reason why the novel incurred censure. The Victorians saw women’s writings with strong prejudice. A novel by a woman should be feminine, which must concern women’s proper sphere and eulogize a domestic angle, otherwise the novel would be condemned improper and the woman must be “pretty nearly unsexed” as James Lorimer commented (as cited in Allott, 1974). If we reject the strong prejudice against women writers, then those factors condemned by Brontë’s contemporaries for transcending the proper sphere of Victorian women, can be recognized as her great feminine consciousness embodied in *Jane Eyre*.

**Key terms:** *Jane Eyre*, defame, the proper sphere, “the Angel in the House”, domestic feminine ideal, author’s gender

## **Introduction**

She once told her sisters that they were wrong – even morally wrong – in making their heroines beautiful as a matter of course. They replied that it was impossible to make a heroine interesting on any other terms. Her answer was, “I will prove to you that you are wrong; I will show you a heroine as plain and as small as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours. (cited in Gaskell, 1997, p.235)

This is one of Charlotte Brontë’s anecdotes, told by her friend Harriet Martineau, about the creation of Jane Eyre, her most famous heroine. Challenging the conventional definition about beauty, what extraordinary glamour could Charlotte Brontë bestow on Jane to win the bet? Indeed, Charlotte Brontë eventually proved to her sisters the success of her heroine. This plain, obscure and little heroine Jane Eyre, with her unconventional rebelliousness and extraordinary life progress, caused a sensation in contemporary London literary society

and brought Charlotte Brontë immediate fame. Since its publication in 1847, not only has *Jane Eyre* captured readers from outside of academia with its absorbing story, but also it has become an object of lively discussion within academia. Plenty of criticism about *Jane Eyre* has been written from various perspectives. Discussions about the social issues, which Charlotte Brontë debunked or ignored, about the textual and contextual interpretation of *Jane Eyre*, or about Charlotte Brontë's psychological world, implicit in *Jane Eyre*, have appeared incessantly in the criticism. *Jane Eyre* pleases and inspires some people as well as provokes and offends some others. Especially in its early reviews, caustic reviews about *Jane Eyre* appeared repeatedly. The novel was deemed improper in terms of its subject matter, the language and its "subversive tendency" (Poovey, 1988, p.147), particularly when Brontë's contemporaries found some evidence in the novel that *Jane Eyre* might have been from the pen of a female. The Victorians argued that women and men should belong in "separate spheres" of domesticity and paid labor, and each sphere had its own responsibilities (Newman, 1996, p.6). Women's proper sphere should be the home. In her proper sphere, a woman should engage in her "proper duties", namely, "to devote herself to the repetitive tasks of domestic labor and to minister to the needs of others" (Newman, 1996, p.6). To some of Charlotte Brontë's contemporaries, the image of Jane Eyre was too far from "the Angel in the House", namely a domestic ideal by which the Victorians defined their women. This paper traces the historical, social and cultural background of Victorian times, discusses the social convention and rules that prescribed the proper sphere for Victorian women, and explains why *Jane Eyre* was defamed by some contemporaries particularly when they associated the works with the author's gender.

### **The Early Reviews of *Jane Eyre***

After its publication, *Jane Eyre* soon drew the attention of London literary society and from within critics' circles because of its unconventionality, and distinctiveness from the mainstream of contemporary fiction. Many reviews about the sensation that *Jane Eyre* had created appeared in various magazines and journals. The well-known Victorian critic of literature George Henry Lews said in the *Westminster Review* that *Jane Eyre* was "the best novel of the season" with "the originality and freshness of its style" (as cited in Barker, 2002, p.170). An anonymous reviewer in *Christian Remembrancer* praised it, writing "no novel has created so much sensation as *Jane Eyre*" with "the remarkable power" that it displayed. This reviewer also found "masculine power, breadth and shrewdness" throughout *Jane Eyre* (as cited in O'Neill, 1968, p.14).

However, there were not just enthusiastic comments voiced about *Jane Eyre* in the early reviews. The reviewers also pointed out the defects in *Jane Eyre* such as the "improbability" and the "coarseness" (as cited in Newman, 1996, p.446). For example, although Lews highly praised *Jane Eyre*'s unconventionality, he felt the scenes of Jane's lonely wanderings in the moors and the dangerous mad wife Bertha Mason, secretly confined to the attic, were improbable. The above said anonymous reviewer for the *Christian Remembrancer* also said of the novel that "the plot is most extravagantly improbable, verging all along upon the supernatural" (as cited in O'Neill, 1968, p.14). By "supernatural" this reviewer is referring to the scene of the mysterious unseen summons that hastened Jane back to Rochester when she was being besieged by St. John's overwhelming proposal (Newman, 1996, p.446). The "coarseness" that the early critics described applied not only to the language that the author used which seemed "ungenteel" to some contemporaries, with its provincialisms and the use of slang, but also the unconventional direct and bold conversations between Jane and Rochester, which seemed scandalous and even immoral to Charlotte Brontë's contemporaries (Newman, 1996, p.447). For example, Jane and Rochester overtly expressed their love and passions for each other; Rochester confessed to Jane his previous love affairs

with several mistresses. Such “coarseness” that the early critics censured would be much worse, especially for those early reviewers who speculated that *Jane Eyre* was written by a woman. Another well-known but very caustic early review was from Elizabeth Rigby (Lady Eastlake) in the famous journal *Quarterly Review*. Apart from the “coarseness” with which Mrs. Rigby was uncomfortable, she said the novel was an “anti-Christian composition”, which might cause the discontent among the working class, and thereby political upheaval. She denounced *Jane Eyre* arguing that “the tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has also written *Jane Eyre*” (as cited in O’Neill, 1968, p.15). In addition, the early reviewers also centered their speculation on the author’s gender. They were all obsessed with guessing whether Currer Bell, a vague pseudonym of Charlotte Brontë, was a man or a woman. If *Jane Eyre* was from the pen of a woman, she would be thought improper and “pretty nearly unsexed” as Lorimer commented (as cited in Allott, 1974, p.116). In order to understand the reasons for the defamation of *Jane Eyre*, particularly in regard to the author’s gender, we need to examine the “proper duties”, the proper sphere prescribed for Victorian women by the social conventions and rules.

### **Proper Sphere of Victorian Women**

Women’s status and rights were very miserable in the nineteenth century. For unmarried Victorian women, society could provide them very few opportunities. The poor women could only work as household servants, farm laborers, or factory workers to survive. The only “genteel” professions open to the average middle-class woman were governess, schoolteacher or companion to a wealthy lady with its awkward status between servant and lady (Thaden, 2001, p.66). Although a few women tried to make a living by writing against the strong social prejudice that literature could not and ought not to be the business of a woman’s life, very few could succeed as Charlotte Brontë eventually did. Middle-class women could only expect a good marriage, which could provide them with a better social position and economic security. Unlike most middle-class boys who received an education to prepare them for a profession, most middle-class girls received a finishing school education, such as playing the piano, drawing, or speaking French, to help them attract a good husband because there were no proper professions open to them (Thaden, 2001, p.65). Married women had far fewer legal rights and had no economic independence. No sooner had a woman married, than she lost her legal rights and property, or the money she earned after marriage was transferred to her husband. Women’s financial dependence on men determined their submission to men and the possibility of men’s arbitrary abuse of women, which was likely to lead to women’s mental disorders. In the novel, Rochester’s secretly concealed wife, Bertha Mason represented the typically miserable status of Victorian married women. With the representation of Bertha, Charlotte Brontë pointedly exposed this typical Victorian social problem. In addition, Victorian women could almost never divorce their husbands as the divorce cost was extremely high and almost impossible to obtain. Married women could not own property to support themselves without depending on their husbands until Britain passed *The Married Women's Property Act* in 1870.

The Victorian age witnessed a profound economic and social change in the nineteenth century as industrial capitalism ascended. With the rise of industrial capitalism, the middle classes demanded more economic, political and cultural power. As urban industrial centers became more and more economically important and women were brought out of home, leaving their proper sphere of domesticity and entering the man’s sphere of paid labor, traditional ideas about woman’s “proper duties” and proper womanhood became more rigid

(Newman, 1996, p.8). This conception was especially held among the middle classes, who thought that a woman should be “a perfect lady, an Angel in the House, contentedly submissive to men, but strong in her inner purity and religiosity, queen in her own realm of the Home” (Showalter, 1999, p.14). Decades later Virginia Woolf also described the Victorian idealized woman:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it – in short...she never had a mind or wish of her own...Above all – I need not say it – she was pure. (as cited in Newman, 1996, p.9)

In the eyes of the Victorians, the idealization of a feminine figure was a morally pure lady who should make a tranquil, clean and comfortable home, where man could escape from the competitive sphere of paid work. Furthermore, by using the function of this idealized figure, the middle classes could also differentiate them from the decadent aristocratic class above them and the working class beneath them, which lacked refinement (Newman, 1996, p.9). Thereby the middle classes could justify their political power and cultural dominance. The ideology of separate spheres and submission of women was an inevitable product of patriarchal society. Undoubtedly, it would create shock and panic for conventional Victorians were women one day to involve themselves in the man’s sphere, taking on vocations as men did and no longer being dependent on men.

### **Proper Sphere of Victorian Women Writers**

In the nineteenth century, there was a greater demand for fiction, which was used as one of the means for the middle classes to consolidate their economic, political and cultural dominance. Moreover, the female reading public also expanded as the middle-class family was equipped with domestic servants and the growing number of commodities that could be bought in the shops instead of being made at home, which meant middle-class women had less and less to do in the household. Books and magazines could help fill more and more of their leisure time (Altick, 1973, p.52). Facing this great demand, women were not content to remain readers only, and they were also eager to write; on the one hand to support themselves economically if they had no other income, and on the other hand to contemplate their proper sphere via the novel. Like Charlotte Brontë, who did not give up writing after being warned by the famous poet Robert Southey that literature could not be and ought not to be the business of a woman’s life, more and more women began to show that literature could become the business of a woman’s life instead of their “proper duties” of pure homemaking. In order to justify their dominance and ascendancy, the middle classes stressed that the representations of a woman in the novel must represent the separate sphere of domesticity, particularly reflecting a woman’s engaging in her “proper duties” of her proper sphere. The Victorians argued woman writer’s writing should accord with this criterion if they had to accept the fact that women had begun to write as men did. They applied “a double standard” to literary works that women’s writing should be differentiated from men’s writing. They argued that a woman writer “was supposed to stay strictly within the limits of female delicacy in subject and style.” Otherwise, she might be “scolded for doing something which, had she been a man, would have been praised” (Ewbank, 1966, p.2). The Victorians expected women’s writings to reflect the feminine values they exalted, namely, “An Angel in the House”: an ideal Victorian woman. Moreover, they would be offended if women’s writing failed to reflect the merits of that domestic ideal. This strong and rigid prejudice towards women’s writing can be learnt from Lewes’s comments:

The advent of female literature promises woman’s view of life, woman’s experience: in other words, a new element. Make what distinctions you please in the social world, it still remains true that men and women have different organizations, consequently different experience...”But hitherto...the literature of women has fallen short of its functions owing to a very natural and very explicable weakness – it has been too much a literature of imitation. To write as men write is the aim and besetting sin of women; to write as women is the real task they have to perform. (as cited in Showalter, 1999, p.3)

The “function” of women’s literature, which George Henry Lewes referred to, should reflect “woman’s view of life” and “woman’s experience” which was different from that of man. If women wrote as men did in terms of the subject matter and the language, which had transcended the range permitted to women, they would fail to fulfill that “function” and their writing should be condemned as “coarseness”. With all the forces from the patriarchal society, women writers of this age were contemplating the ideal of womanhood through novels. As Ewbank (1966) pointed out, although the plots were different, the novels of this age shared the same theme “with the woman as an influence on others within her domestic and social circle” (p.41). It was in this theme, she concluded, that “the typical woman novelist of the 1840s found her proper sphere: in using the novel to demonstrate (by assumption rather than exploration of standards of womanliness) woman’s proper sphere” (p.41). Here the subject matter and style must concern woman’s proper sphere in a woman’s writing, otherwise she and her writing would be deemed as improper.

### ***Jane Eyre*: “Improper” Sphere for a Victorian Woman Writer**

After having probed the Victorian’s criterion of a domestic ideal and their expectation that woman’s writing must reflect that criterion, now we can easily understand why *Jane Eyre* was so much defamed by some of Charlotte Brontë’s contemporaries in terms of its subject matter, the language, and its “subversive tendency”, especially once her contemporaries associated *Jane Eyre* with a female authorship.

Domestic novels of the first half of the nineteenth century dealt with the home, the hearth, children and relationships between women and love. Domestic novels represented the home as the sphere over which the woman presided and were an important expression of “separate spheres ideology”: the separate spheres of domesticity and paid labor (Newman, 1996, p.8). They acted as a guide to right conduct and set good examples for how women could become perfect ladies. Different to the characteristics of traditional domestic novels, *Jane Eyre* was tracing a woman’s growing progress and exploring female sensibility, while the worshiper of “female sensibility” was deemed as the big enemy to female writing in this age. In addition, the Victorians saw woman’s true function as an “influence” rather than “an independent agent” (Ewbank, 1966, p.39). However, in *Jane Eyre*, Jane asserted her own identity as an individual, rather than exist in terms of her influence with a domestic circle (Ewbank, 1966, p.41).

The Victorians stated that the criterion of a domestic ideal was that a pure feminine mind must know “no sin, no evil, no sexual passion” (Ewbank, 1966, p.43), while to the Victorians, Charlotte Brontë obviously seemed “unwomanly” against this doctrine. Jane’s rebellion against oppression and subjection, her longing for equality and independence, her courage of expressing love and her true self, made the image of Jane too much unlike

“the Angel in the House” that the Victorians extolled (Pan, 2003, p.13). For example, Charlotte Brontë’s handling of Jane’s revealing her innermost secret love to Rochester challenged the convention that women never told their love. Provoked by Rochester’s tricks of pretending to marry Miss Ingram to make her jealous, Jane spoke openly of her passion for Rochester:

Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! --- I have as much soul as you --- and full as much hearts! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh: it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal --- as we are! (Brontë, 2003, p.240)

Apart from Jane’s openly expressing her passion making her contemporaries uncomfortable, some (particularly in Mrs. Rigby’s reviews) also complained about Rochester’s pouring out his sexual transgressions to Jane, a young unmarried woman, who listened to the details of those love affairs without feeling anything distasteful. Poovey (1988) explained what offended the contemporaries here was that “the author of the novel knows more about sexual matters than the character admits and that the novel is ‘vulgar’ because it makes the hypocrisy of women’s professed innocence legible” (p.135). And it would be more scandalous for those contemporaries who were suspecting the book was produced by the hand of a woman.

In addition, *Jane Eyre*, to a very large extent, was a rebel against the domestic feminine ideal which the nineteenth-century Victorians were busy with building up. It explicitly challenged and condemned the conventions of the domestic feminine ideal. For example, when Jane worked as governess in Thornfield, she released her famous “feminist manifesto” (Rich, 1979, p.97), which was also Charlotte Brontë’s.

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, 2003, p.101)

The idea of women as being equal to men and women’s needs being the same as men’s was undoubtedly crazy and unacceptable to Victorians. What the contemporaries objected to was exactly this “subversive tendency” (Poovey, 1988, p.147). No wonder Jane says, “Anybody may blame me who likes...” (Brontë, 2003, p.100) before she gave the above feminist manifesto, which implied Charlotte Brontë clearly foresaw the condemnation that the above words must incur. Another example also showed Jane’s distaste for the convention of the domestic feminine ideal, “An Angel in the House”. When Rochester promised that he would take Jane

as “a very angel” and his “comforter” (Brontë, 2003, p.247) to revisit Europe, Jane responded to him very unconventionally “I am not an angel... and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself” (Brontë, 2003, p.247). She refused to be the domestic angel that Rochester, namely the patriarchal society and convention, wanted.

It was Victorian convention and custom that caused Brontë’s cotemporaries to see women’s writings with prejudice. Charlotte Brontë also encountered the same “double standard” that Victorians applied to literary works in the reviews of *Jane Eyre*. In Charlotte Brontë’s own words, they would have “praised the book if written by a man, and pronounced it ‘odious’ if the work of a woman” (as cited in Ewbank, 1966, p.2), which showed the strong prejudice to women’s writings. Just as Showalter (1999) also pointed out, “to their contemporaries nineteenth-century women writers were women first, artist second” (p.73). In Victorian times, a novel by a woman should be feminine, which must concern women’s proper sphere and eulogize a domestic feminine ideal, otherwise the novel would be condemned improper and the woman must be “pretty nearly unsexed”.

### **Conclusion**

Against the Victorian’s criterion of a domestic ideal and their expectation that women’s writing must reflect that criterion, *Jane Eyre* was defamed by some of Charlotte Brontë’s contemporaries, especially in light of its female authorship. Those factors condemned by the contemporaries for transcending the proper sphere of Victorian women are actually the great feminine consciousness of the author embodied in *Jane Eyre*. Fortunately, today we could reject those prejudices against women writers when reading the book. What we see is that Charlotte Brontë portrayed an indomitable female figure that sets a good example for the world’s women who are currently experiencing difficulties. Moreover, she provided an important feminist text and asked people to re-examine women’s values, roles and functions in the male-dominated Victorian culture, which objectively pushed forward the later world feminist movement.

As a Victorian woman and a woman writer, facing the ideology of woman’s proper sphere prescribed by convention, Charlotte Brontë was contemplating her own proper sphere as a woman and as a writer, and her heroine Jane was also in the process of looking for her own in the novel. Charlotte Brontë made Jane find it finally: a proper sphere with a traditional domestic life, but more importantly, with her own independence and equality with men, which was rather unconventional within the mid-nineteenth century literary world.

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