

# A Study about the Contradiction in Jane Eyre—— Proto-feminism versus Anti-feminism

Haoye Man

College of Education for the Future, Beijing Normal University at Zhuhai, China.

Corresponding author e-mail: manhaoye123@163.com

**Abstract.** Jane Eyre is a complicated novel that may be appreciated from multiple perspectives. To go deeper into Jane Eyre's ideological implications, this essay examines the novel's contradictions, concentrating on whether Jane Eyre is a proto-feminist or anti-feminist work. Jane's rebelliousness, her desire to move physically and mentally, and the drive to pursue equality are all examples of how Jane Eyre can be called a proto-feminist novel. Nevertheless, it can be also be viewed as anti-feminist in, for example, Charlotte Brontë's handling of marriage and Jane's transformation into an "angel in the house". It also depicts the treatment and position of women in Victorian society. After considering both sides of the argument, I continue to believe that Jane Eyre is a proto-feminist novel because it represents Jane's own spirit and achieves what she desires: love and happiness. This essay provides a fresh viewpoint on Jane Eyre, allowing readers to gain a more complete comprehension of the novel through the lens of proto-feminism and anti-feminism.

**Keywords:** Proto-feminism; Anti-feminism; Charlotte Brontë; Jane Eyre

## 1. Introduction

Charlotte Brontë successfully subverts the Victorian feminine ideal in her magnum opus, Jane Eyre (1847) by creating a female character who is perpetually thirsty for knowledge, dares to reject oppression, demands independence, and pursues equality. For these reasons, "modern literary criticism has long recognized Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre as a pivotal text" for proto-feminists [2].

Nevertheless, Jane Eyre is a complicated novel. As "a thousand Hamlets exist in a thousand people's eyes", it can be appreciated from different perspectives. Some debate whether or not Jane Eyre and Rochester's marriage is a good one. Does Jane deserve to marry someone who has lied and previously had several mistresses? Is Rochester justified in deceiving Jane? And what about Jane's eventual transformation into an "angel in the house" charged with taking care of Rochester? Additionally, we must consider Bertha Mason, who is pitifully imprisoned by Rochester and deprived of every liberty. As a result of these factors, it can be seen as an anti-feminist novel. I will respond to these points in the subsequent statement.

I will begin my argument with defining the terms "Proto-feminism" and "Anti-feminism" (S2). Then, analyze the ways Jane Eyre may be considered a proto-feminist novel (S3). Following that, I will examine the anti-feminist interpretation. (S4). Afterwards, I will respond to the objection and provide my ideas. (S5) Eventually, I will draw a conclusion and point out the limitations. (S6)

## 2. Explanation of "Proto-feminism" and "Anti-feminism"

As a matter of fact, all feminist theories begin with the premise that women are an oppressed and discriminated class, that women are unequal to men in every field, as Beauvoir stated in *The Second Sex* [3]. And this discrimination is deeply ingrained in cultural tradition, as *The Genesis of Bible* states: "And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of man." Due to the woman's consumption of the tree's fruit, the god says: "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to your husband, and he shall rule over thee."

Therefore, “Feminism” is the belief “that men and women are equal and thus deserve equal social, political, and economic rights and opportunities.” The term originated in France in 1870 and quickly spread throughout Europe and some American countries. [4].

Although feminism as a concept only emerged in the late 19th century when the Frenchman Charles Fourier coined the term “feminisme”, many women (dubbed proto-feminists) were expressing feminist concerns long before then. For instance, the ancient Greek poet Sappho’s works contained feminism ideas; medieval German philosophers Hildegard of Bingen expressed feminist consciousness in her writings; and French poetess Cristine de Pisan slammed misogyny in her work *The City of Ladies* (1404) [5,6].

When *Jane Eyre* was first published in 1847, the term “feminism” did not exist in that era. Thus, proto-feminism is a term that refers to “a philosophical tradition that anticipates modern feminist ideas in the period when such concepts (means ‘feminism’) were still unknown” And one point I want to stress is that “the precise use of the term is disputed, 18th-century feminism and 19th-century feminism being also subsumed under ‘feminism’ proper” [7].

On the contrary, “Anti-feminism”, to put it simply, is an opposition to the principles and concept of feminism in some or all of its forms. “Anti-Feminists prefer to follow a more appropriate Biblical representative of women modeled in scripture (Christianity)” and believe that “wives should submit themselves gracefully to their husbands”, to be the “angel in the house”. Males and females alike can be anti-feminists [8]. Indeed, some of the most illustrious anti-feminists have been female, such as Queen Victoria, who once stated in response to women’s demands for the right to vote:

“I am most anxious to enlist everyone who can speak or write to join in checking this mad, wicked folly of ‘Women’s Rights’, with all its attendant horrors, on which her poor feeble sex is bent, forgetting every sense of womanly feelings and propriety. Feminists ought to get a good whipping. Were woman to ‘unsex’ themselves by claiming equality with men, they would become the most hateful, heathen and disgusting of beings and would surely perish without male protection.”

### 3. The Ways to be Considered as a Proto-feminist Novel

Firstly, *Jane Eyre* courageously opposes oppression towards her and is brimming with a fearless spirit. Even as a child, a female, and a ward of her aunt, she rebels against cruelty and injustice. Fostered in her aunt’s house, she is miserable due to her cousin John’s domineering violence, Eliza and Georgiana’s arrogance, and her aunt’s prejudice. Thus, when she is beaten and reprimanded by John, her fear and patience reached the limit, as she thinks: “like any other rebel slave, I felt resolved, in my desperation, to go all lengths”. 1(Chapter. 2) She no longer opts to grin and bear it. She chastises her cousin for being like a “murderer and slave-driver” (Chapter. 1), and engages in physical combat with him. She does the same with the cruel Mrs. Reed by saying:

“I am glad you are no relation of mine: I will never call you aunt again so long as I live. I will never come to see you when I am grown up; and if any one asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say the very thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty.” (Chapter. 4)

She feels very relieved and even enjoys making this harsh speech:

“Ere I had finished this reply, my soul began to expand, to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph, I ever felt. It seemed as if an invisible bond had burst, and that I had struggled out into unhoped-for liberty.”(Chapter. 4)

At Lowood school, she is still very rebellious. Observing her best friend Helen endure Miss Scatcherd’s constant abuse and insults, she “could not comprehend this doctrine of endurance; and still less could understand or sympathise with the forbearance she expressed for her chastiser”. Moreover, she tells Helen: “if I were in your place I should dislike her; I should resist her. If she struck me with that rod, I should get it from her hand; I should break it under her nose.” (Chapter. 6). This is the distilled essence of *Jane Eyre*’s spirit of fearless resistance.

Moreover, she adores life and bravely explores it, while at the same time absorbing knowledge and desiring advancement. The world in her eyes is “wide”, is a “a varied field of hopes and fears, of sensations and excitements, awaited those who had courage to go forth into its expanse, to seek real knowledge of life amidst its perils.” (Chapter. 10) It has developed into a powerful motivator for her to study and work diligently, as she states:

“I had the means of an excellent education placed within my reach; a fondness for some of my studies, and a desire to excel in all, together with a great delight in pleasing my teachers, especially such as I loved, urged me on” (Chapter. 10)

Meanwhile, she has a high sense of self-esteem and self-love, bravely expresses her desire for love, and strives for equality within it. The most famous words she says to Rochester embody this perfectly:

“Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automaton?- a machine without feelings? and can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips, and my drop of living water dashed from my cup? 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 heart! 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!” (Chapter. 23)

This is a very famous scene. She doesn’t feel inferior owing to her low status: she believes she and Rochester are equal before God and deserve equal respect. However, in Victorian society, she is not his equal: she is younger, a female, poor, and an employee; the fact is that the love between Rochester and Jane Eyre is a cross-class love, which brings about the anxiety and worries in Jane Eyre’s heart due to the large disparity in their social status and wealth. As she says, “wealth, caste, custom intervened between me and what I naturally and inevitably loved” (Chapter. 23); “the more he bought me, the more my cheek burned with a sense of annoyance and degradation.” (Chapter. 24) She desires independence, which is why she refuses to give up her governess position and desires nothing more than Rochester’s regard, which perfectly reflects her spirit of equality.

What’s more, she speaks directly on women’s issues, and her remarks reflect Proto-feminist ideas:

“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.”(Chapter. 12)

It is very clear this comment by Jane rejects the Victorian ideal of the angel in the house and rejects the limitations of enforced domesticity.

#### **4. Anti-feminists’ Objection**

While Jane Eyre has therefore been interpreted as a proto-feminist novel, this view is not without controversy. When it comes to the marriage between Rochester and Jane Eyre, Rochester has had several mistresses prior to meeting Jane, whereas Jane is an innocent plain girl who has had no contact with men except for her cousin John and Mr. Brocklehurst. Even worse, Jane’s affection for Rochester is pure and sincere, while Rochester deceives her. He already has a wife (Bertha Mason) before he proposes. Following that, he “tried the companionship of mistresses” (Chapter. 27), developing a close relationship with Céline Varens, Giacinta, and Clara in succession, and referring to himself as a “intellectual epicure” to acquire gratification with them.

What’s more, he describes his relationship with Jane as follows: “this is what I wished to have: this young girl, who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell, looking collectedly at the gambols of a demon, I wanted her just as a change after that fierce ragout” (Chapter. 26). He wants her just as a

change, asks her to dedicate and compares the process to “handling the flower” (Chapter. 27). And he plans “when we have been married a year and a day, I will tell you; but not now” (Chapter. 25). By that time, Jane could be pregnant or even have had his child: to renounce him would be declare herself a fallen woman and her child a “bastard”. Social shame and ostracism would inevitably follow. Likewise, Jane is heartbroken and suffers greatly as a result of the marriage’s illegality, as she perceives: “The whole consciousness of my life lorn, my love lost, my hope quenched, my faith death-struck, swayed full and mighty above me in one sullen mass. That bitter hour cannot be described” (Chapter. 26). From this point, Rochester is selfish, irresponsible, and unworthy of Jane’s passionate affection. He regards Jane as “the instrument for my cure” (Chapter. 20) and seeks redemption through her. And in his own words, he describes his treatment of Jane as follows: “you must regard me as a plotting profligate-a base and low rake who has been simulating disinterested love in order to draw you into a snare deliberately laid, and strip you of honour and rob you of self-respect.” (Chapter. 27). They don’t get married on an equal footing at the first one.

Moreover, looking at Bertha Mason, we see that she is Rochester’s wife, but is imprisoned and deprived of liberty by him. Besides this, “it is striking that Bertha is never allowed to speak for herself”, we learn about her only through Rochester’s narrative, rendering the narrative position insufficiently objective and neutral. We only have his word that Bertha was “intemperate” and “unchaste” in the early days of their marriage and Rochester, who has had mistresses, is a hypocrite to comment on chastity at all. Even Jane says: “you are inexorable for that unfortunate lady: you speak of her with hate- with vindictive antipathy. It is cruel- she cannot help being mad” (Chapter. 27). From this point, Bertha Mason is “the victim of oppression” [9].

Furthermore, when it comes to the novel’s conclusion, the marriage of Rochester and Jane, it is always debatable whether it is a satisfactory conclusion. Rochester is not particularly attractive and is considerably older than Jane, not to mention that Rochester is already disabled and can be viewed by readers as a burden to Jane. And for Jane, although she once says “I am not an angel... and I will not be one till I die” (Chapter. 26). However, she eventually transformed herself into “the angel in the house” by declaring:

“I love you better now, when I can really be useful to you.”; “I will be your neighbour, your nurse, your housekeeper. I find you lonely: I will be your companion - to read to you, to walk with you, to sit with you, to wait on you, to be eyes and hands to you. Cease to look so melancholy, my dear master; you shall not be left desolate, so long as I live.” (Chapter. 36)

The words she uses: “useful”, and the fact that she continues to address Rochester as “master”, indicate that this is still a patriarchal context. After years of struggle, all she wants to do is take care of Rochester at home and have a happy marriage. It has nothing to do with proto-feminism, which emphasizes the role of women in society, as stated in the comments: “Jane’s triumph resides in assuming the conventional role of wife. None of Brontë’s females achieves true independence or freedom.” [10].

## 5. Response to Anti-feminists’ Objection

Jane Eyre, in my opinion, remains a proto-feminist novel. Despite Rochester’s several mistresses prior to meeting Jane, which seems unfair to Jane, but nevertheless, I believe it is comparable to Romeo’s situation in Shakespeare’s works. He was previously involved with Rosaline before meeting Juliet. When discussing Romeo and Juliet, we become immersed in and appreciative of their genuine love [11]. And certainly, we believe there is no injustice because Romeo has a richer experience of love. Finding true love usually entails numerous attempts, and it is at this point Jane is arguably the luckier one, since she is able to locate him more readily. And Jane, without a doubt, obtains what she desires: love and happiness. She famously says, “Reader, I married him” (Chapter. 38), demonstrating her ownership of the decision. If this is what she wants, then it is a feminist conclusion, in spite of what readers think of Rochester.

Also, while some of Rochester's words and behaviors are inappropriate, he genuinely loves Jane. Extreme love generates immoral thoughts, which motivates him to marry her regardless of consequences. And most significantly, in establishing a rapport with Jane, Rochester emphasizes not his superiority over her, but his sense of equality with her [12]. So does he; he believes he has the same right to pursue love as Jane by explaining to her: "it was not my original intention to deceive, as I have deceived you. I meant to tell my tale plainly, and make my proposals openly: and it appeared to me so absolutely rational that I should be considered free to love and be loved" (Chapter. 27). Also, it's never his intention to hurt Jane, as evidenced by his statements to her:

"I never meant to wound you thus. If the man who had but one little ewe lamb that was dear to him as a daughter, that ate of his bread and drank of his cup, and lay in his bosom, had by some mistake slaughtered it at the shambles, he would not have rued his bloody blunder more than I now rue mine." (Chapter. 27).

As a result of these thoughts, the narrator severely punishes him: he loses his beloved and becomes disabled, his home is burned down. In despair, he recognizes, confesses, and repents, saying:

"I did wrong: I would have sullied my innocent flower breathed guilt on its purity: the Omnipotent snatched it from me... I began to experience remorse, repentance; the wish for reconciliation to my Maker." (Chapter. 37).

Furthermore, while Rochester's narrative about his first marriage is not sufficiently objective and neutral, there is no doubt that Bertha Mason does grow insane and extremely hostile. It is critical to take action in this circumstance. In his own words, where he expresses his innermost ideas plainly:

"My plans would not permit me to remove the maniac elsewhere- though I possess an old house, Ferndean Manor, even more retired and hidden than this, where I could have lodged her safely enough, had not a scruple about the unhealthiness of the situation, in the heart of a wood, made my conscience recoil from the arrangement. Probably those damp walls would soon have eased me of her charge: but to each villain his own vice; and mine is not a tendency to indirect assassination, even of what I most hate." (Chapter. 27).

Rochester could have transferred her to the mad house or Ferndean Manor, which would have allowed him to escape this situation sooner. He could have done this, and perhaps as a result, Bertha Mason might have died sooner, allowing him to Jane to marry legitimately. Nonetheless, he performs his responsibility of caring for Bertha. He pays Grace Poole a very high salary and even risks his own life to save hers when she sets fire to the house and runs to the roof. He is crippled and blinded as a result of this. The problem is he has no feelings for Bertha, telling himself: "that woman is not your wife, nor are you her husband. See that she is cared for as her condition demands, and you have done all that God and humanity require of you". (Chapter. 27). I believe by depicting Bertha Mason and the tragedy marriage of them, the narrator condemns the marriage based on the interest of pedigree and fortune. Without sincere loving affection, marriage is doomed to failure.

Apart from that, I believe Rochester and Jane's marriage is a good and joyful conclusion. As I previously stated, their marriage is a cross-class union. There is a big disparity between them, and that's why to Jane it initially feels unreal and awkward. A governess marrying a lord of the manor is definitely inappropriate in Victorian time, as Mrs. Fairfax shocked reaction and misunderstanding upon seeing Jane Eyre and Rochester together reflects the strong sense of class hierarchy at that time. Nevertheless, the narrator reconciles this disparity by rendering Rochester disabled and granting Jane financial independence in order to strike a balance between them, embodying the concept of equal love and marriage. Additionally, at this circumstance for Jane's sake she would feel more empowered and comfortable to be equal with Rochester. It is not that he must be lowered for them to marry but rather than Jane is happier marrying him from a position that is more equal.

Meanwhile, Jane does become an "angel in the house", but it's not via compromises or concessions: as a rich woman, she has the option of marrying someone else or remaining single. Jane makes this decision entirely on her own, as she states: "I told you I am independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own mistress" (Chapter. 37). This outcome is absolutely voluntary, she is free to live the life she desires rather than being coerced by society, which still reflects proto-feminism. And she expresses

her genuine happiness at the prospect of marrying Rochester, saying: “to be your wife is, for me, to be as happy as I can be on earth.” (Chapter. 37). I believe that by describing their marriage, the narrator has given readers with an ideal marriage: one that is founded on equality and independence, on caring for and respecting each other, on being faithful to each other, and on finding happiness and fulfillment in the dedication of love. Therefore, I would argue that this conclusion is proto-feminist.

In addition, the narrator lets the man become so weak and so reliant on the woman, which undermines a patriarchal context, I think to some extent it represents the narrator’s aspiration for the equal rights of men and women.

## 6. Conclusion and Limitation

I want to repeat that Jane Eyre is a complicated novel which can be appreciated from multiple perspectives. I analyze Jane Eyre’s contradictions by identifying ways in which it might be called a proto-feminist novel, such as fighting oppression, demanding advancement, pursuing equality of love and personality freedom. Following that, I express the point that the novel could be interpreted as anti-feminist, citing the treatment of Jane and Bertha, as well as the ending in which Jane becomes “the angel in the house”. Then, after much deliberation, I respond to the issue, insisting that this is a proto-feminist novel and presenting my viewpoints.

Nonetheless, there are still some problems that remain unresolved. To give an illustration, if the narrator intends to emphasize Jane’s independence, to convey to readers that it is Jane’s ongoing effort that ultimately results in economic independence and gender equality, we must evaluate how she becomes rich: she inherits her uncle’s estate. This is not the outcome of her efforts; the prerequisite for her independence remains her reliance on others, more precisely, on man. What is the narrator attempting to convey with this? I’m still at a loss for an answer to it. Perhaps this is the novel’s charm: it’s easy to understand but hard to decipher, allowing it to be appreciated from many perspectives.

## References

- [1] All the quotations from the novel are taken from: Charlotte Brontë. 1847. Jane Eyre.
- [2] Griesinger E. Charlotte Brontë’s Religion: Faith, Feminism, and Jane Eyre. *Christianity & Literature*, Vol.58 (2008) No.1, p. 29-59.
- [3] Li Yinhe. *Feminism*. Shandong people’s publishing house, 2005, p. 1-2.
- [4] Lin Shuming. *Feminist Literary Criticism from a Multidimensional Perspective*. China Social Sciences Press, 2004, p. 16.
- [5] Information on: <https://jamesbishopblog.com/2019/12/18/the-origins-of-feminism-in-the-18th-century-proto-feminism/>.
- [6] Cheng Xilin, Fang Yazhong. *What is Feminist Criticism*. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2011, p. 1-4.
- [7] Information on: <https://edtimes.in/what-is-proto-feminism-and-who-are-the-women-responsible-for-this-philosophical-tradition/>.
- [8] Information on: <https://www.allinallspace.com/what-is-anti-feminism/>.
- [9] Information on: <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-figure-of-bertha-mason>.
- [10] Anderson J. (2004) *Angry Angels: Repression, Containment, and Deviance*, in Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre.
- [11] Shakespeare W. 1595. *Romeo and Juliet*. HarperCollins Publishers, 1595.
- [12] Gilbert S. *Plain Jane’s Progress*. *Signs*, Vol.2 (1977) No.4, p. 779-804.
- [13] Information on: <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/jane-eyre-and-the-rebellious-child>.
- [14] Zou Xiaoyan, Wang Yifei. *Exploring Western Feminism from Jane Eyre*. Hubei Social Sciences. (2010) No.11, p. 134-137.