

Three Watercolor Paintings in Jane Eyre

Shaojun Song

School of Foreign Languages, Beijing Forestry University, Beijing, 100083, China

Abstract

Since its publication, *Jane Eyre* has received widespread concern from academic circles abroad and at home. Currently, based on macro literary criticisms, the studies on *Jane Eyre* mainly focus on the themes and characters, with a little attention to the three paintings in the novel. Through close reading, and combined with two aspects, namely, the symbolization of plots and the religious connotation, the study analyzes the three watercolor paintings drawn by Jane at Lowood Institution in order to investigate the relationship between paintings and plots, as well as the underlying religious metaphors. Through the investigation of these three paintings, the study finds the cormorant painting, the Evening Star painting and the iceberg painting hint different life stages of the heroine, referring to the torture of Jane at Gateshead and Lowood, the struggle at Thornfield and the rebirth at Moor House, respectively. At the same time, the paintings redefine the relationship between Jane and Rochester as Eve, Satan and Adam in *Paradise Lost*. Hence, paintings are not independent of the novel, and they play profound roles in promoting the plot and shaping characters. By interpreting *Jane Eyre* from paintings, the study shows the importance of paintings in understanding the setting, the characters and the author herself and provides a new perspective for research of this novel, so that readers can understand this great artistic work better.

Keywords

Jane Eyre; Watercolor Paintings; Symbolism; Religious Metaphor; *Paradise Lost*.

1. Introduction

1.1. A Brief Introduction of Charlotte Brontë and Jane Eyre

Charlotte Brontë, one of the most prestigious female novelists in the nineteenth century, whose works are all about women's strong desire for independence, has left an enormous fortune in the history of English literature. In her short life, Charlotte Brontë authors four novels, the most famous of which is *Jane Eyre* published in 1847, and has a profound impact on the contemporary literary world. In this novel, the author, through a unique artistic perspective, depicts the life of a governess Jane Eyre who is unattractive and miserable but is still brave to pursue true love based on equality. Aimed at uncovering inequality of men and women in a patriarchal society, this novel inspires women in the nineteenth century to break established stereotypes and to defend themselves.

1.2. Literature Review

Scholar's home and abroad have done researches on Jane's three landscape paintings drawn at Lowood, namely, the cormorant painting, the Evening Star painting and the iceberg painting from different kinds of perspectives. Most of previous studies look into these three paintings from the perspective of feminism.

Some critics applied the theory of symbolism to explore the meaning of watercolor paintings from the perspective of imagery. In Richard Moore's article, he demonstrated that these three landscape paintings were clues to the whole story, and they mainly indicated different destinies of the characters in this novel, respectively referring to Blanche Ingram, Bertha Mason and St.

John Rivers, and each of them had a deep connection with Jane [1]. While Liang Chao announced that the cormorant painting, the Evening Star painting and the iceberg painting hinted different life stages of the heroine, which were 'The Inferno', 'The Purgatorio' and 'The Paradiso' quoted by Dante, referring to the torture of Jane at Gateshead and Lowood, the struggle at Thornfield and the rebirth at Moor House, respectively [2].

Philip C. Rule first mentioned that these paintings might contain religious thoughts [3]. By studying the images in each painting, he found that there was a correlation between Jane's paintings and *Paradise Lost*, and he stated that these paintings reveal "a prognostication of Jane's and Rochester's future" [4], and indicated that Jane acted as Eve who redeemed Rochester's Adam. He also proposed that cormorant was the incarnation of Satan. By contrasting John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Xiao Sha in her essay investigated three landscape paintings drawn by Jane and redefined the relationship between Jane and Rochester as Eve and Adam or Eve and Satan. She maintained that the cormorant painting indicated Satan's sneaking into the Garden of Eden; the Evening Star painting implied Eve's deceived by Satan while the ice berg painting intimates what Satan saw in hell [5].

In this study, the two perspectives above would be combined to help readers better understand the underlying meanings behind the three watercolor paintings.

1.3. Thesis Statement and Arrangement

This study will focus on the three main watercolor paintings drawn by Jane. By investigating the art elements in them, the inner connotations behind the three paintings would be further discussed. It aims to answer the following questions:

- 1) How do the three paintings hint three different life stages of the heroine Jane in Gateshead and Lowood, Thornfield and Moor House?
- 2) What are the similarities in the relationship of Jane and Rochester in *Jane Eyre* and that of Eve, Adam and Satan in *Paradise Lost*?

This paper contains five parts. The first part is introduction, including a brief introduction of Charlotte Brontë and *Jane Eyre*, a literature review of past studies, as well as thesis statement and arrangement. From the second part to the fourth part, explanation and implication of the three paintings are explored respectively from the view of symbolism in implicating the following plots and the correlation of *Paradise Lost* to compare the relationship between Jane and Rochester with Adam, Eve and Satan. The last part is the conclusion of the whole study.

2. The Cormorant Painting

2.1. 'The Inferno': Torture at Gateshead and Lowood

Jane Eyre's first 18 years of childhood and girlhood are all set in gray and black. In that boundless sky, there is no sunshine and no white clouds, just like Jane's life has no warmth and no joy, there are only black suffocating clouds and terrible silence before the storm. Born as an orphan, Jane has lived at Gateshead since she was a child. After the death of uncle Mr. Reed, she lives alone with Mrs. Reed, whose three kids all treat Jane violently and severely. Jane could not feel the warmth and safety from this so-called 'family', just as the dark and large cormorant perches on this swollen sea without a piece of land. Additionally, after being sent to Lowood Institution, poor and pale Jane still endures the humiliation from Mr. Brocklehurst, who harshly tyrannizes those girls living there in the name of God, indeed, is on behalf of the bourgeoisie and male power.

In the 18 years of Jane Eyre's bleak life, there are three women who plays an important role in the formation of Jane's character. They are Bessie, Helen and Miss Temple, especially the latter two. From Helen, Jane acquires the spirit of tolerance. Under the influence of Miss Temple, Jane learns a wealth of religious knowledge and the Christian character of being good at overcoming

laziness. But unfortunately, Helen died, Miss Temple left, they were submerged by the reality of the storm, out of Jane's life stage. But the good qualities left by them shine in Jane's life like the gold bracelet with jewels, which makes Jane a woman with self-respect, considerate, tolerant spirit and independent personality. The sinking corpse can be seen as Helen, who represents countless good spirits strangled by the unfair dark society. At the same time, it is not difficult to see that the cormorant on the mast is obviously the symbol of Jane herself. They are humble and ugly, but they are brave and independent, fighting against the storm. Jane has been always pursuing independent personality and survival value, and has a distinct rebellious spirit.

2.2. Rochester: Satan in Adam's Clothing

The main character of the first painting is a huge black cormorant with a gold bracelet in its mouth. A drowned body floating in the water can be seen in the distance. The bracelet is pecked off the body's arm [6]. In Chapter 4 of *Paradise Lost*, Satan sneaks into the garden of Eden, just like a cormorant squatting on the tallest tree of life in the middle of the park. It's not to get another life, but to try to kill the living [7]. Just as Conover points out, Brontë's frequent use of this image alludes to Milton's Satanic cormorant, which possesses "powers of life and death over others" [4]. In heraldry and medieval ornamentation, cormorants, representing the Christian cross, symbolize nobility and sacrifice. Cormorant is not metaphor of others, but the charming and dangerous Rochester.

The relationship between Jane and Rochester is twofold from the very beginning: on the surface, it is the relationship between the lonely governess and the dominant upper-class man like Eve and Adam; but in fact, it is the relationship between a slave from the bottom class and a disguised evil who rescues her but tempts her to commit crimes just the same as Eve and Satan.

3. The Evening Star Painting

3.1. 'The Purgatorio': Struggle at Thornfield

If the first painting is suffocating, then the second one is quite mysterious. This painting is closely related to Jane's life in Thornfield where Jane begins a new life, which was totally different from the dull and lifeless boarding life of the previous 18 years. In this painting, the distant mountain peak is hazy, and the grass and leaves seem to be blown by the breeze, which gives people the feeling of softness and freshness. What Jane yearns for is this peaceful, romantic and idyllic life.

While the upper body of the woman rising to the sky in the painting is the reflection of Jane's desire for ideal life. The woman's eyes in the painting are dark and wild. The two contradictory expressions of sadness and wildness are intertwined, which are consistent with Jane's character. Her appearance is calm, but her heart is in love with her master Rochester. The woman's pale forehead was crowned with a star. The star always twinkled on her forehead, guiding her direction of action. The Evening Star is the symbol of reason, which determines the principle and destiny of Jane's life. Jane always warns herself with reason to avoid indulging her passion, but this kind of self-restraint just shows that the tide of her inner passion may break through the fence of reason at any time. That's why the illusion of the Evening Star appears in the clouds and heads down. The second painting vividly shows Jane's inner struggle between reason and emotion.

3.2. Jane: Innocent Eve Deceived by Satan

The second painting depicts the evening sky, mountain peaks and the bust of a woman [6]. It corresponds to the moment in *Paradise Lost* when Eve is deceived to lose her innocence. That is, when the red sun falls to the west and the evening star rises, Satan persuades Eve to taste the fruit of the tree of knowledge [7].

Glibert and Gubar believe that Brontë is the representative of romantic female writers. She appreciates and even worships Satan's rebellious spirit of Byron style, his contempt for traditional morality, and his violent power. She also stirs up Satan's rebellious impulse in her heart. Therefore, Eve in her works is both a sin and a shadow of Satan, and Satan's relationship with Eve is just like his relationship with sin, that is, both her lover and her father [8].

4. The Iceberg Painting

4.1. 'The Paradiso': Rebirth at Moor House

In the third stage of her life, Jane meets her cousin, St. John, a missionary with noble character but quite coldhearted. In the face of St. John's strong will to devote himself to religion and selfless spirit of martyrdom, Jane begins to feel uneasy for her selfish mortal love. But St. John cannot make Jane give up her pursuit of love and happy marriage and instead give her passion and life to God. So, in the third painting, Jane is trapped in such a white world surrounded by ice and snow. She leans her head on the iceberg and seems to be about to compromise. Her nose and mouth are covered by a black veil, which makes it difficult for her to breathe, just as St. John suppresses Jane's pursuit of freedom, personal happiness and sex with his black missionary coat. By this time, Jane's mind almost has a tendency to devote herself to religion that the misty white flame is shining. This is the call of Almighty God in Jane's mind, which seems to guide the lost lamb back to the right path of religion.

At this time, we see a brighter spark embedded in the flame. What kind of spark can be more dazzling and brighter than the holy fire of God? Only human nature, only the fire of human nature. In the whole novel, 'fire' is also the most intriguing mystery. When Jane and Rochester's two stubborn hearts collide, the sparks of love burst out. This burning feeling is something that St. John can't give to Jane and that God can't satisfy Jane. It is this love of human nature that Jane refuse St. John's proposal and resist the call of religion. At the moment when Jane almost gives up her hope and self, love lashes Jane's numb soul with unstoppable magic power, and Rochester's three "Jane" calls Jane back.

4.2. Rochester: from Satan to Adam

The third painting depicts the Arctic winter sky, the tip of an iceberg and a huge head. The forehead is bloodless, the eyes are dull and hopeless, and the temples are wrapped with a headcloth. The decoration on it is a portrait of the crown worn on the invisible body [6]. The invisible body is wearing a crown-like thing on its head, which is exactly the language used by Milton in Chapter 2 of *Paradise Lost* to describe Satan's glimpse of Death in hell [7].

This is a representation of Satan Rochester's baptism and repentance after the burning of Thornfield and his injury. He finally transforms into the incarnation of Adam in Brontë's works. In other words, at the end of the novel, the deep relationship between Rochester and Jane evolves from the conquest and conquered relationship between Satan and Eve to the ideal marriage relationship between Adam and Eve.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Three Paintings: Three Different Life Stages

The three paintings represent three stages of Jane's life: her eighteen years torture at Gateshead and Lowood, one year struggle in Thornfield Manor, and days spent in Moore House fighting for a rebirth. Like the trilogy of Dante's, *The Divine Comedy*, Jane went through 'The Inferno' and 'The Purgatorio', and finally entered 'The Paradiso': having a happy marriage with her love Rochester while the same living an independent life of her own.

To sum up, the three pictures depicted by Brontë through rich and romantic imagination, sometimes like a lyric poem with true feelings and sometimes like a drama with ups and downs, leading us into the spiritual world of the heroine Jane Eyre and attracting us to explore the mystery of her deep thoughts.

5.2. Relationship between Jane Eyre and Rochester: Eve, Adam and Satan

The allusions from Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* appear many times in *Jane Eyre*, which shows that Brontë's literary imagination of the relationship between Jane and Rochester obviously draws on the images of Eve, Satan and Adam in *Paradise Lost*. At the end of the novel, the deep relationship between Rochester and Jane evolves from the conquest and subjugation between Satan and Eve to the ideal marriage between Adam and Eve.

In Jane's confession of this happy ending, Brontë's intention of echoing the lines in Milton's *Paradise Lost* is very clear. "I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine. No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am; ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh [6]." This passage almost interprets Adam's confession to Eve in *Paradise Lost* as a realized reality [7]:

*Should God create another Eve, and I
Another rib affords, yet loss of thee
Would never from my heart; no no, I feel
The link of nature draws me: flesh of flesh,
Bone of my bone thou art, and from thy state
Mine never shall be parted, bliss or woe.*

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