

**JANE EYRE: A FEMINIST PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE ON THE SOCIAL STATUS OF THE VICTORIAN WOMAN**

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*Abstract: In Jane Eyre, Charlotte Brontë addresses feminist issues that reflect the social background of nineteenth-century British society. This paper analyses the novel from a feminist psychoanalytic perspective, revealing the manner in which Victorian women were supposed to display themselves in order to please the ones watching: men – the gender oppressors – who established chauvinistic rules by which they judged women's self-presentation. Moreover, the analysis is also based on the reading of Jane Eyre as a woman who fears motherhood and whose nightmares reflect the anxieties that most Victorian women experienced in relation to this issue. The protagonist's dream accounts take the form of expression and, alternatively, that of repression. As the novel is widely considered fundamentally confessional in nature, the heroine's maternity-related fears are meant to be read as 'journeys' into the unconscious of the Victorian authoress herself. In addition, the description of Jane's sketches can also be regarded as valuable material for psychoanalysis because it suggests her desire to have a powerful visual impact on the man she loves with the esthetic beauty of her paintings which compensates for her plain-looking physical aspect. To a certain extent, the need to be admired points to Brontë's own frustration with herself falling short of the Victorian version of feminine ideal. The protagonist paints sublime images that reflect her innate qualities and unique inner life. Nevertheless, they are also indicative of her lower middle-class social status that sets her culturally apart from inferior classes (that cannot create or appreciate art). All in all, dream accounts, art description and relevant scenes in the novel are insightful not only in terms of dissecting the writer's repressed wishes, but also regarding the main characteristics of the class membership of the average white*

*Keywords: feminist perspective, psychoanalysis, Victorian woman, feminine ideal, social status.*

In *Jane Eyre*, essential aspects of the social status of the lower middle-class Victorian woman are depicted in the protagonist's dreams, art and self-presentation. The dreams can be analysed from a feminist psychoanalytic perspective achieved through the reading of Jane as a woman who fears marriage (a form of imprisonment and annihilation of identity and autonomy) and motherhood which is alluded to in the nightmares reflecting anxieties related to maternity. Similarly, Jane's paintings and sketches are suggestive of the manner in which Victorian women were supposed to display themselves in order to please the ones watching: men (the gender oppressors) who established chauvinistic rules by which they judged women's self-presentation. Therefore, her art can also be analysed from both critical perspectives.

### The Interpretation of Jane Eyre's/Charlotte Brontë's Dreams

Feminist standard readings of Jane's dreams include the protagonist's attempt to come to terms with her childhood and Jane's childlike powerlessness in relation to Rochester.<sup>1</sup> However, taking into consideration the confessional nature of the novel, Brontë's dislike of children must have influenced her creative process. Therefore, despite the tendency (of literary critics) to marginalise the impact of the writer's fear of motherhood on her novel, the protagonist's conflicts with maternity are evident in: her nightmares of children, her 'cool'/distant relationship with Adèle, her critique of Victorian idealisation of the mother/child connection, her infantilized treatment by Rochester and her care-giving as a pseudo-mother to her maimed husband.<sup>2</sup> As a result, feminist analyses of Jane's struggles with maternity should focus on the way cultural assumption (of the Victorian woman's self-fulfilment through marriage and mothering) is undermined in the novel.

The children in Jane's dream stand for an idea (which is the fear of motherhood) – the unidentifiable infants thus symbolising the burden of maternity to self-actualisation. This idea is evident in the fact that even the dreams of children who are not in danger seem disturbing. For instance, Jane remembers (with great fear) Bessie's interpretation of dreams according to which infants are a sign of trouble.<sup>3</sup>

At first, Jane dreams of children playing, crying, seeking her affection and (at the same time) running away from her:

It was a wailing child this night and a laughing one the next: now it nestled close to me, and now it ran from me; ... for seven successive nights to meet me the moment I entered the land of slumber.<sup>4</sup>

This dream portrays motherhood as a series of contradictions and the recurring dreams become even more threatening:<sup>5</sup>

I was burdened with the charge of a little child: [...] which shivered in my cold arms, and wailed piteously in my ear.<sup>6</sup>

'I dreamt another dream, sir: [...] I still carried the unknown little child: I might not lay it down anywhere, however tired were my arms – however much its weight impeded my progress, I must retain it. [...] I was shaken; the child rolled from my knee, I lost my balance, fell, and woke'.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Godfrey, E., 'Jane Eyre, from Governess to Girl Bride', *SEL*, 45.4, 2005, 853-874 and Seelye, J., *Jane Eyre's American Daughters: from the Wide, Wide World to Anne of Green Gables a Study of Marginalized Maidens and What They Mean*, University of Delaware Press, 2005, pp. 83-4 apud. Lemaster, T., 'M/Othering the Children: Pregnancy and Motherhood as Obstacle to Self-Actualization in Jane Eyre', [http://www.genders.org/g47/g47\\_wright.html](http://www.genders.org/g47/g47_wright.html), February 2, 2010, paragraph 5

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Lemaster, T., 'M/Othering the Children: Pregnancy and Motherhood as Obstacle to Self-Actualization in Jane Eyre', [http://www.genders.org/g47/g47\\_wright.html](http://www.genders.org/g47/g47_wright.html), February 2, 2010, paragraphs 1-24

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, paragraph 3

<sup>4</sup> Brontë, C., *Jane Eyre*, page 231 apud. Lemaster, T., 'M/Othering the Children: Pregnancy and Motherhood as Obstacle to Self-Actualization in Jane Eyre', [http://www.genders.org/g47/g47\\_wright.html](http://www.genders.org/g47/g47_wright.html), February 2, 2010, paragraph 3

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Lemaster, *op. cit.*, paragraph 4

<sup>6</sup> Brontë, C., *Jane Eyre*, Penguin, 1994, p. 279

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 280

In both dreams, Jane must endure an obstacle that prevents her from moving/travelling freely: the child appears as weight that hinders progress. Her physical exhaustion and constant carrying of the child evoke pregnancy.<sup>8</sup>

The hindrance (the child) that prevents Jane from moving in her dream is connected to her famous soliloquy that touches upon feminist issues such as restraints against women's social advancement:

Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. [...] Women are supposed to be very calm generally: [...] 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.<sup>9</sup>

This connection is suggestive of Jane's fear of pregnancy which she believes would prevent her from experiencing life freely. The protagonist's reflection on women's lack of freedom indicates that she is painfully aware of a limit which women cannot overpass. This limit is a stationary mother role. The fact that Jane complains about the hardships of motherhood (in this scene) is suggested by the allusions to maternity that her feminist speech contains: the cooking of puddings (food edible for babies) and the knitting of stockings (which is also a reference to motherly duty). The millions to whom the protagonist refers in her soliloquy is such a great number that it must also include mothers.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Jane compares her own 'imprisonment' to the confinement that mothers must endure and she realises that their confinement is even greater: 'millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine.'<sup>11</sup> This realisation is also suggestive of the heroine's fear of becoming a mother. Therefore, the freedom that Jane desires (and mentions in her monologue) is unavailable, primarily, to mothers and, as a result, the protagonist regards pregnancy (and, subsequently, maternity) as a state which is dangerous for a woman's selfhood (sense of self).<sup>12</sup>

The fear of motherhood expressed through dreams is indicative of the necessity of not only feminist but also psychoanalytic readings. Jane's dreams are authentic 'journeys' into the depth of the (protagonist's/novelist's) unconscious, such an achievement being rarely encountered in Gothic novels at that time. In addition, the use of the heroine's dream accounts sometimes takes the form of expression and sometimes of repression, becoming the ideal material for psychoanalysis.<sup>13</sup>

Charlotte Brontë's 'daydream' was to become a writer and one of her recurrent dreams was the one in which her dead sisters (Maria and Elizabeth) became fashionably dressed and criticised Charlotte (just the way upper class ladies would). The 'dream' of becoming a writer and the nightmares she often had are strongly connected and seem to be reflected in *Jane Eyre* in which Brontë tells the story of a young woman who – like her sisters in the dream – becomes wealthy and independent after lowly beginnings.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that Charlotte Brontë created a heroine whose destiny involves the fulfilment of the novelist's repressed wishes suggests that she did exactly what Freud claimed that

<sup>8</sup> Seelye, J., *Jane Eyre's American Daughters: from the Wide, Wide World to Anne of Green Gables a Study of Marginalized Maidens and What They Mean*, University of Delaware Press, 2005, pp. 83-4 apud. Lemaster, T., 'M/Othering the Children: Pregnancy and Motherhood as Obstacle to Self-Actualization in *Jane Eyre*', [http://www.genders.org/g47/g47\\_wright.html](http://www.genders.org/g47/g47_wright.html), February 2, 2010, paragraph 5

<sup>9</sup> Brontë, *op. cit.*, p. 111

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Lemaster, T., 'M/Othering the Children: Pregnancy and Motherhood as Obstacle to Self-Actualization in *Jane Eyre*', [http://www.genders.org/g47/g47\\_wright.html](http://www.genders.org/g47/g47_wright.html), February 2, 2010, paragraph 13

<sup>11</sup> Brontë, *op. cit.*, p. 111

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Lemaster, *op. cit.*, paragraph 13

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Thomas, R., 'The Advertisement of *Jane Eyre*', in *Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre: a Casebook*, Edited by E. B. Michie, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 47-77

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 47-77

writers do (in *Creative Writers and Daydreaming*): she obtained relief from a repressed desire (of acquiring independence and wealth) by experiencing a fantasy/daydream through writing the story that she would have liked to live. Brontë's desire to acquire higher social status and financial control over her own life manifested itself repeatedly in her dreams and, according to Freud, only repressed wishes are expressed by means of dreams. Moreover, the fact that she often had the same dream suggests that the tension caused by the unfulfilled desire was overwhelming for her. This points to the dignity and self-control of the authoress who successfully repressed her impulses for a long period of time and did not express them directly. According to Sigmund Freud, fulfilling one's desire by means of creative writing is socially acceptable (because it is achieved in a disguised form), whereas fulfilling it through evident daydreaming is not. The way in which Brontë satisfied her needs (through writing) is proof of her 'disciplined' mind and soul.

Brontë was, in a sense, conscious of the relief that dreams can provide and, as a result, 'allowed' her heroine to escape tension by dreaming. Moreover, the writer was also aware of the fact that accepting one's dreams (by verbalising their contents) is important for overcoming the obstacles/the challenges that one faces in life. Therefore, she instinctively knew that expressing the wishes and anxieties that manifest themselves in dreams is the equivalent of acknowledging one's hidden (even forbidden) desires and also of refusing to deny personal aspirations and true identity. This is why Jane Eyre feels the need to describe her dreams in contrast with Brontë who felt reluctant to tell her dream about the disturbing change undergone by her two dead sisters.<sup>15</sup> The heroine insists on making her dreams known to others: Jane manages to tell Rochester the dreams she has despite his active interference. In relation to this, (in a certain scene) the readers can notice the heroine's refusal to yield to her future husband's demand that she stop talking about her saddening dreams:

'Look wicked, Jane I would rather be incensed than saddened. [...] I thought, Jane, you had told me all'.

The disquietude of his air, the somewhat apprehensive impatience of his manner, surprised me: But I proceeded.<sup>16</sup>

The most significant dreams in the novel are the ones Jane wishes to describe to Rochester before their failed attempt to get married. The first one is strikingly meaningful (it is full of hidden meanings):

I was burdened with the charge of a little child: [...] I thought, sir, that you were on the road a long way before me; and I strained every nerve to overtake you, and made effort on effort to entreat you to stop – but my movements were fettered, and my voice still died away inarticulate; [...].<sup>17</sup>

'The child that Jane has charge of in the dream seems in its inarticulate wailing to warn Jane against following Rochester and suffering Bertha's fate. [...] The thing that Jane's dream-self and her dream-infant have in common is their inability to speak authoritatively and articulately'.<sup>18</sup>

The second dream that Jane wishes to describe to Rochester 'is really an elaboration of the first, an expression of the desire that her voice not die away without articulating her own

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 47-77

<sup>16</sup> Brontë, C., *Jane Eyre*, Penguin, 1994, p. 280

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 279

<sup>18</sup> Thomas, R., 'The Advertisement of Jane Eyre', in *Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre: a Casebook*, Edited by E. B. Michie, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 63-4

independence, financial and psychological'.<sup>19</sup> This dream reflects an inner conflict: the heroine wishes to maintain control over her own life, but, at the same time, she is tempted by Rochester's mastery over her (she wants to follow him down the road he travels). The cost of yielding to the temptation of being with Rochester would be the loss of the baby (whose destiny is identified with that of Jane), which would mean that she would lose control over her own destiny. As a result, Jane's desire to retain possession of this child (of her own life) exceeds her wish to stay by her loved one's side.<sup>20</sup>

The heroine's dreams seem to be what Freud claimed dreams, generally, are: an expression of fears and repressed desires. The second dream described to Rochester is an expression of two repressed desires: the wish to let a man control her life and the desire to rebel against her status by abandoning the fulfilling relationship she has with Rochester in order to satisfy a need that a Victorian woman should not admit to – the need to be completely independent. The dream also expresses the fear of losing her own voice to that of her future husband. The anxiety and the wishes identifiable in the dream are also noticeable in Jane's restlessness before the wedding: she feels that Rochester attempts to offer her expensive gifts against her will in order to transform her into one of his former lovers (whom he treated this way) and change her identity. Jane wants to enjoy Rochester's gifts at the expense of her own independence, but also wishes to become the opposite of the ideal Victorian woman – a female individual who rebels against social conventions and chooses not to be submissive. Because both desires are shameful – each from a different perspective – they are censored by the conscious part of the psyche and, therefore, they become repressed wishes that manifest themselves in dreams. Moreover, the fact that, in her dream, Jane sees Rochester 'lessening' as he is farther and farther away, suggests that Jane wants him to become less of a man and less of a rich upper-class gentleman in order to be able to marry him without having to bear the thought that he is superior to her and can, therefore, dominate her.<sup>21</sup>

'I dreamt another dream, sir: [...] I saw you like a speck on a white track, lessening every moment. [...] I was shaken; the child rolled from my knee, I lost my balance, fell, and woke'.<sup>22</sup>

Another meaningful dream in the novel is the one Jane has after she has discovered that there is a Mrs. Rochester who makes her marriage impossible:

'My daughter, flee temptation.'

'Mother, I will.'

So I answered after I had waked from the trance-like dream.<sup>23</sup>

At this point in the novel, the heroine has only two options: to leave Thornfield (and escape temptation) or to become Rochester's mistress. The dream she has helps her make a decision. Jane's account of the dream she has ends with the words 'I will' ('Mother, I will'<sup>24</sup>) that could be spoken as a wedding vow to Rochester, but, instead, declare her independence and power because – psychologically – they bring her into possession of herself. Jane's vision of herself (as a mother figure) in this dream is gradually formed in her unconscious and

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 64

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 64

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 64

<sup>22</sup> Brontë, C., *Jane Eyre*, Penguin, 1994, p. 280

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 316

<sup>24</sup> Brontë, *loc. cit.*



anticipated in her paintings (which, as any form of art, ‘draw’ their material from the unconscious):<sup>25</sup>

### Admiring and Displaying Art

The purpose of the protagonist’s paintings is to excite admiration and amazement, which is obvious in the gazers’ reaction. Bessie states that Jane’s artistic talent is a ladylike quality and Mr. Rochester is surprised at the protagonist’s ability to achieve such uncommon paintings:

As I saw them with the spiritual eye, before I attempted to embody them, they were striking;

‘[...] The drawings are, for a schoolgirl, peculiar. [...] And what meaning is that in their solemn depth?’<sup>26</sup>

[...] A drowned corpse glanced through the green water. The second picture contained [...] a woman’s shape to the bust. [...] The third showed [...] a head – a colossal head. ‘[...] To paint them, in short, was to enjoy one of the keenest pleasures I have ever known.’<sup>27</sup>

Jane’s painting and sketching reflect the desire to display as well as the need to watch. For instance, Jane takes pleasure in the fact that Rosamond wants to show her painting to her father, but also enjoys being able to analyse and copy a model such as the young and beautiful Rosamond. Besides the desire to look and be looked at by the man she loves, Jane (indirectly) expresses another wish – that of having her paintings admired. Therefore, to the active form of looking and the ‘passive’ form of exhibiting (the pleasure of being watched by Mr. Rochester), a more suitable way of sublimating and satisfying exhibitionist impulses is added through Jane’s art. Nevertheless, her sketching and painting are not announced as a form of display in the novel. On the contrary, they are represented in terms consonant with the domestic feminine ideal.<sup>28</sup> Her painting is ‘represented as a private, solitary pastime. We learn only incidentally that her work is displayed over the chimneypiece at Lowood; she agrees to show her portfolio to Rochester only when, tipped off by Adèle, he imperiously demands it of her; and Rosamond Oliver discovers her sketches while “rummaging” in Jane’s drawers and cupboards’.<sup>29</sup>

All in all, Jane’s art is displayed in a discreet manner and is, consequently, represented as different from Blanche’s art – the performance at the piano which is meant to excite admiration. Moreover, Jane’s manner of watching others and displaying herself is essentially different from that of Mrs. Ingram. The latter thrives on other people’s attention, displays herself in an unfeminine manner (that repels Mr. Rochester) and is not able to notice others (as she fails to acknowledge Rochester’s disapproval of her own behaviour).

The impulse to look as well as exhibit should not be analysed in sexually reductive terms. This wish can be placed ‘in the context of desire as psychoanalysis conceives of it’,<sup>30</sup> but the issues of watching and displaying in *Jane Eyre* should not be analysed only from a psychoanalytic perspective. They are connected to Brontë’s depiction of the concept of

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Thomas, R., ‘The Advertisement of Jane Eyre’, in *Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre: a Casebook*, Edited by E. B. Michie, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 67

<sup>26</sup> Brontë, *op. cit.*, pp. 126, 128

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 127

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Newman, B., ‘Excerpts from *Subjects on Display*’, in *Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre: a Casebook*, Edited by E. B. Michie, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 158

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 157

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 157-8

Victorian femininity which should be discussed in feminist terms as well. Jane's artistry is meant to signify in *social* terms and to reflect Brontë's exploration of the Victorian ideal femininity. Through her painting and sketching, Jane displays her social status while avoiding direct display of her *person*.<sup>31</sup>

The manner in which Jane Eyre displays herself reflects her innate qualities, her social status as well as the Victorian version of ideal femininity (which she embodies). Jane's art is a means of 'displaying' her innate qualities as well as a way of asserting her class membership. Jane tries to paint the sublime and the subjects she chooses reflect the unique interior depths (of the protagonist) which compensate for her plain physical aspect. Moreover, the paintings are proof of the heroine's nondomestic (even anti-domestic) impulses which also suggest the uniqueness (distinctiveness) of her nature.<sup>32</sup>

As previously mentioned, Jane's paintings are also indicative of her social status as art fulfils the social function of legitimising social differences and pointing out the separateness between the individuals who are able to appreciate (and understand) art and the ones who are not (and belong to the lower social classes). Jane's artistic creations indicate her radical difference not only from those socially beneath her, but also from those belonging to the upper classes who, unlike the heroine, create automatically and effortlessly.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, Jane's paintings set her apart from ladies such as Blanche whose 'purely performative [...] art seems distinctly soulless and brittle'.<sup>34</sup>

### Victorian Female Self-Presentation

The way female characters 'display' themselves and are watched by men (particularly, by Rochester) in the novel can be understood only if placed within a specific social context. Credit depended on reputation and middle-class enterprise depended on credit. Creditworthiness was indicated by signs of dress, speech and etiquette that displayed family wealth in order to consolidate social ties. This social context accounts for the contradictions between the negative and positive social meanings of display (that are identifiable in the novel): Mr. Brocklehurst lectures the girls at Lowood against the display of physical beauty, but his wife and daughters arrive at the school dressed fashionably and made-up. By placing this contradiction within Victorian social context, it can be explained in terms of the divided ideal of social duty that required wealthy women to maintain their families' social position through costly dress and self-presentation (through personal display) while requiring lower-class women to respect the ideal of Christian duty which entailed humility and spirituality.<sup>35</sup>

Therefore, for upper-class women, personal displaying was a social duty. However, even at this level, there is a contradiction: besides the negative and positive meanings of social display already mentioned, there is another dissociation between 'positive' and 'negative' self-presentation. Newman discusses this (second) contradiction/dissociation by pointing out the difference between Blanche's and Jane's manner of displaying (themselves). Jane does not enjoy being the centre of attention and prefers to be modest, refusing Rochester's expensive gifts, whereas Mrs. Ingram likes being watched by others, but fails to realise that her indiscreet manner of presenting herself is what repels Mr. Rochester.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 157-8

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 158-64

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 161

<sup>34</sup> Newman, *loc. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 161

<sup>36</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 161

Miss Ingram was very showy, but she was not genuine; [...] To watch Miss Ingram's efforts at fascinating Mr. Rochester, to witness their repeated failure – herself unconscious that they did fail [...] was to be at once under ceaseless excitation and ruthless restraint.<sup>37</sup>

Further on in the novel, Jane renounces the exhibitionistic display that her future husband tries to impose on her (by asking the protagonist to wear jewellery and fashionable items of clothing that he attempts to offer to her as gifts). It is this very quality (visible in the heroine's attitude) that makes Rochester love Jane. He admires the fact that the heroine is different from the other women he has met (Bertha, Céline, Giacinta, Clara and Blanche) who have displayed their charms in an indiscreet manner and have, finally, proven to be unworthy of a gentleman's love. Jane's originality (which seems to attract the man she loves) is constructed as the Victorian version of ideal femininity: the protagonist embodies the ideal domestic woman (who knows how to present herself) in contrast with Rochester's former mistresses who appear as shamelessly exhibitionistic.<sup>38</sup>

Therefore, the second disassociation between 'positive' and 'negative' display (of oneself) is related to the opposite manners in which a lady may choose to present herself: discreet or indiscreet. Nevertheless, this perspective on Victorian women's self-presentation can be considered a chauvinistic one since the way they display themselves is judged by the ones who are looking/watching: men. As a result, the Victorian social duties (and the entire mentality) previously presented may be regarded as directly connected to gender oppression. However, aside from Victorian social context (which accounts for the feminist perspective on female self-presentation), Jane Eyre's wish to watch others and display herself can also be placed within the context of desire as psychoanalysis conceives of it.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast with Blanche Ingram (who is showy and wants to be the centre of attention), Jane Eyre does not wish to be noticed - she attends the party held at Rochester's house trying to escape attention: 'I sit in the shade; [...] the window-curtain half hides me.'<sup>40</sup> In this scene, Jane seems to fear being watched (or even noticed) by others. The protagonist's shyness/fear of attention is caused by her discontent with her social status and physical aspect: she dislikes the fact that she is just a governess and not a beautiful/attractive lady such as Blanche Ingram.<sup>41</sup>

Despite her fear of being noticed, Jane also seems to desire to be looked at by Rochester: 'I feared – or should I say, hoped? – the allusion to me would make Mr. Rochester glance my way; and I involuntarily shrank further into the shade: but he never turned his eyes'.<sup>42</sup> Besides this 'socially inadequate' wish to enjoy the attention of Mr. Rochester, Jane also proves capable of a desire to watch which exceeds what can be satisfied in acts of moral supervision. She takes great pleasure in watching Rochester at the party and she looks at him in a compulsive and undisciplined manner:<sup>43</sup>

My eyes were drawn involuntarily to his face; I could not keep their lids under control. [...] I looked, and had an acute pleasure in looking – a precious yet poignant pleasure [...] with a steely point of agony.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Brontë, C., *Jane Eyre*, Penguin, 1994, pp. 185-6

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Newman, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-8

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 155-8

<sup>40</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, Penguin, 1994, p. 173

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 155

<sup>42</sup> Brontë, *op. cit.*, p. 175

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 155

<sup>44</sup> Brontë, *op. cit.*, p. 173



‘Jane’s “acute pleasure in looking” indicates her wayward, undisciplined, libidinally active, class-crossing desire’.<sup>45</sup>

*Jane Eyre* provides readers with the depiction of typical patterns of watching and displaying in Victorian society as ‘Brontë’s fiction circles obsessively around the relationship between concealment and selfhood, from the earliest writings onwards’.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, ‘the preoccupation with the power of the penetrating gaze in Brontë’s fiction is not peculiar to her writing but can be located historically within a wider field (of literary and social concern)’ which reflects the Victorians’ obsession with watching and displaying.<sup>47</sup>

### Conclusions

This paper analyses *Jane Eyre* from a feminist psychoanalytic perspective based on the reading of the protagonist as a woman who fears motherhood and whose maternity-related anxieties offer great insight to the unconscious of the Victorian authoress herself. Moreover, the description of Jane’s sketches and paintings can also be regarded as valuable material for psychoanalysis because it suggests the protagonist’s desire to be admired and it points to Brontë’s frustration with her own plain looking physical features that fall short of the Victorian version of feminine ideal. All in all, dream accounts, art description and scenes relevant for typical Victorian female self-presentation reflect the writer’s repressed wishes as well as the main characteristics of lower middle-class women within a patriarchal society.

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**\*This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/159/1.5/S/133652, co-financed by the European Social Fund within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013.**

<sup>45</sup> Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 156

<sup>46</sup> Shuttleworth, S., ‘Insanity and Selfhood’, in *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 39

<sup>47</sup> Shuttleworth, *loc. cit.*