

Research on the “Other” Writing in Charlotte Brontë’s Novels

Pengchao Liu

Yantai Nanshan University, Yantai 265700, Shandong, China

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Abstract: When it comes to Charlotte Brontë, many scholars focus their research on her masterpiece *Jane Eyre* and the female characters in it, as if Charlotte Brontë can only be regarded as a pure feminist writer with *Jane Eyre* as her representative work. The author holds that research on Charlotte Brontë should appropriately move beyond the single category of “*Jane Eyre* and feminism” and examine the characterization in her works from a broader perspective. Through an investigation of her three representative works—*Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *Villette*—it can be found that most of the “Other” characters portrayed in them are negative. This phenomenon reflects the author’s subconscious inferiority and arrogance, a psychology shaped not only by Charlotte’s personal experiences but also by the influence of imperialist narratives in her era.

Keywords: Charlotte Brontë; The Other; Negative images

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1. Introduction

As the most productive and renowned among the “Brontë Sisters” in the literary world, Charlotte Brontë and her works have always maintained a high level of discussion. However, the focus of these discussions has long been on the novel *Jane Eyre* and feminist research on it, while her other two works from her creative career, *Shirley* and *Villette*, have received relatively little attention^[1]. This practice has firmly labeled Charlotte as a “feminist writer,” leading most observers to examine her creations only through this label. Nevertheless, through reading her other two full-length novels, *Shirley* and *Villette*, the author finds that the various “Other” images shaped in her three full-length novels all tend to be negative.

“The Other” is a concept formed in relation to the “Self,” referring to all people and things outside the Self. Since its birth, this philosophical concept has been continuously deepened by Hegel, Marx, Foucault, and others. In modern times, it has combined with feminism, post-colonialism, ecological criticism, and other theories, gradually developing into a poetics of the Other^[2].

2. The alienated other

The concept of the Other was first combined with feminism to criticize the patriarchal society for shaping women as

the Other outside power, and on this basis, it has continuously shifted and deepened its focus. However, returning to the philosophical meaning of “alienation” inherent in “the Other,” when a female writer serves as the narrative subject, the Other in the text becomes obvious—namely, the men in the author’s narration^[3]. The “Other” in the works of Charlotte Brontë, a female writer, refers to the male characters she portrays.

Although Charlotte’s three full-length novels—*Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *Villette*—successfully shape strong and independent heroines, all these heroines ultimately achieve a relatively happy ending with another male protagonist, such as Jane Eyre and Rochester. Moreover, through close reading of the texts, it is not difficult to find that in the emotional development of the heroines, Charlotte is accustomed to setting up two male characters to have emotional entanglements with the heroine, and finally determines the final pairing through a “two-choice-one” model. For example, Jane Eyre with Rochester and St. John in *Jane Eyre*; Shirley with Louis and Robert in *Shirley*; and Lucy with John and Paul Emmanuel in *Villette*. However, unlike the traditional happy ending where handsome men and beautiful women get together, which is more accepted by the public, Charlotte invariably arranges for her heroines to end up with the male protagonist characterized by an “unbeautiful” appearance in the “two-choice-one” selection^[4].

In this “two-choice-one” dilemma, Charlotte intentionally creates a profound contrast in the appearance of the two male characters^[5]. In *Jane Eyre*, when the male protagonist Rochester first appears, he is described in Jane Eyre’s eyes as having a “dark face, stern features, and a furrowed brow,” so much so that Jane Eyre thinks to herself, “If he had been a handsome young gentleman, I would not have dared to stand here and ask him questions despite his refusal.” In contrast, St. John Rivers, Jane Eyre’s other suitor, is tall and slender with a perfectly proportioned Greek face. In *Shirley*, just as readers expect the novel to move towards the clichéd ending where the handsome Robert Moore wins the heroine Shirley’s heart, Charlotte introduces another, less attractive Louis Moore: “Louis had more of his sister’s short nose and long upper lip than his brother’s fine features. He also had her mouth and chin—by no means as firm, regular, or delicate as those of the young factory owner.” Louis ultimately becomes Shirley’s partner. In *Villette*, the contrast between the two male characters is even more pronounced—Dr. John and the teacher Emmanuel. In Lucy’s eyes, Dr. John “still retained the charm of a sixteen-year-old boy. He had his eyes, and some of his facial features—that is to say, all the fine contours of the lower part of his face.” Emmanuel, on the other hand, “was indeed a small, dark man, fiery and serious. Even in my eyes... that short-cropped black hair, that broad sallow forehead, those thin cheeks, those slightly quivering large nostrils, that penetrating gaze, and that hurried manner.” Without exception, Charlotte chooses Emmanuel as Lucy’s final partner.

Many scholars regard Charlotte Brontë as a pioneer of modern feminism, but using this reason alone to explain her choice of the appearance characteristics of the above male characters seems insufficient. Compared to Jane Austen before her, who also constructed her ideal endings in pursuit of female independence in her works, Austen’s works are not lacking in handsome male protagonists. To infer Charlotte’s creations merely by belittling the appearance of male characters would be nothing short of slander against this female writer^[6]. All three of Charlotte’s full-length novels have strong autobiographical elements, especially *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. The protagonists of both are projections of Charlotte herself: a woman who is short in stature, plain in appearance, yet quite intelligent^[7]. Therefore, the author believes that the final result of the “two-choice-one” model needs to be explored by the creator herself.

Elizabeth Gaskell described Charlotte’s appearance as “small in stature,” “not fully grown,” “a curved mouth,” “a large nose,” and “as solemn as an old Venetian portrait.” Her humble family background, the experience of losing her mother and sisters at an early age, her ordinary appearance, her fragile health, and her outdated clothing influenced by her father and aunt all created a deep inferiority complex in the female writer’s heart when she was young. After reading Charlotte’s early letters exchanged with friends, Gaskell concluded, “Miss Brontë never dared to hope for the future.” At the same time, due to receiving a good education, Charlotte’s inferiority complex manifested as extreme self-confidence externally. From an early age, Charlotte believed in the importance of education and value, firmly convinced that they were more important than appearance. Therefore, when shaping Jane Eyre, she stated, “I will prove to you that you are wrong; I will show you a heroine who, like me, is plain and small in stature, yet can arouse the same interest in readers as any heroine you have written.” These words not only express her original intention for writing but also contain Charlotte’s

vision for her own future: like Jane Eyre, she could gain love through her intelligence rather than her appearance^[8]. However, her lack of hope for the future led to a distinct sense of “unworthiness” in Charlotte. When a relationship came, she would consciously feel unworthy of it.

3. The exotic other

In post-colonial theory, the “Other” specifically refers to the counterpart of the “local.” It emphasizes its characteristics of being an object, foreign, specific, fragmented, and different, so as to show its identity and role external to the “local.” The existence of the “Other” not only constitutes a difference from the “local” but also serves as a reference for the “local” and forms an intertextual relationship with it.

Gayatri Spivak argued that “one should not engage with any text of the nineteenth century without considering how it upholds and reflects imperialist values.” In the nineteenth century, Hegel’s philosophy of history was used to justify the claim that the task of completing human “history” had been transferred to European countries. Under this view, “all the present and future belong to white-skinned Europe.” The era in which Charlotte lived was a period of great advancement for Britain. As a subject of the powerful Victorian era, Charlotte’s writing inevitably carried the arrogance of the suzerain state. This resulted in the portrayal of “non-English” exotic lands in her three full-length novels as dangerous, barbaric, and uncivilized, in sharp contrast to the civilized and progressive England, while the “Other” from exotic lands were portrayed as inferior and full of flaws^[9].

In the first chapter of *Shirley*, three curates appear: the English clergymen Sweeting and Donne, and the Irishman Malone. Although Charlotte mocks the three curates in the first chapter, she only teases Sweeting and Donne for their gluttony, while focusing on depicting Malone’s Irish vulgarity. His “Irish upper-class appearance” is like that of a slave owner; he is deeply in debt, arrogant, bad-tempered, and “abuses others in the high-pitched tone of a Celt.” In the final chapter of the work, Charlotte recounts the final fates of the characters: Sweeting marries the wealthy Miss Sykes and receives a substantial dowry; Donne also marries an intelligent and elegant young woman and becomes a true parish priest. However, Charlotte dismisses Malone’s fate with contempt: “For you are a born imp—coarse, dirty, naughty—you must step down.” Although Ireland was part of the United Kingdom, due to historical, religious, ethnic, and other reasons, England had long maintained a hostile attitude towards Ireland during the Victorian era, and Charlotte’s disdain for Ireland is clearly evident in her works. In addition to the arrangement of Malone’s fate, in the Whitsuntide chapter, facing neatly dressed English girls, Charlotte exclaims, “Poverty can make an Irish girl ragged, but it cannot deprive an English girl of the right to be neatly dressed, for she knows she must respect herself.” This description, which completely disregards common sense, portrays Irish girls as lacking self-respect, amounting to a slander.

In contrast, for Robert, the non-English protagonist, Charlotte depicts his internal conflict between commercial interests and inner emotions. Initially, Robert chooses Shirley for the sake of profit rather than Caroline, whom he truly loves. After experiencing a series of setbacks, he finally has an epiphany, follows his heart, and gets together with Caroline. In contrast, Caroline always maintains her love for Robert, highlighting the purity and kindness of English girls.

Villette is the only one of Charlotte’s three novels whose story takes place far away from England. “Villette” (modeled after Brussels, the capital of Belgium) means “small town,” and Charlotte also uses “Labassecour” (meaning “farmyard”) in the book to refer to Belgium^[10]. Although Charlotte studied in Brussels as a young girl, this proud English girl mocked the Belgians in letters to her friends: “The Belgians hate the English. Their superficial moral standards are stricter than ours.” In *Shirley*, Charlotte depicts the character Hortense Moore in a playful tone, almost portraying the brother of the male protagonist, who adheres to Belgian lifestyles, as a buffoon. In *Villette*, Charlotte’s discrimination against non-English places further develops. In the third chapter of the novel, this discrimination is reflected through the book read by Paulina. The book describes a scene where, in a country far away from England, there lives a group of naked savages who gather around a kind English missionary in black to listen to his sermons. Additionally, Paulina mentions that Chinese women’s feet are even smaller than hers. It seems that the description at the beginning sets the tone for the entire work,

and all of the protagonist Lucy's subsequent experiences are infused with the author's contempt for non-English regions and their people. Charlotte describes the foreigners Lucy encounters in the small town of Villette; except for Emmanuel, the male protagonist, all other non-English characters are "negative." Lucy seems to be a cynic entering the secular world, criticizing everything around her. When Lucy first arrives in Villette, she is chased by two men posing as gentlemen on her way to find Madame Beck's school and only manages to escape with the help of patrolling officers. The Labassecour women around Lucy have no shame in lying and can do so in a relaxed and composed manner every time. Among Lucy's three colleagues, one is narrow-minded and selfish; one, a Parisian woman focused on in the novel, is morally corrupt and promiscuous, pursuing Paul for money as a rival to Lucy; and the other is unusually greedy for money. As for Madame Beck, the principal, Charlotte initially shows her business acumen and pursuit of equal teaching attitudes: "Thus, at Madame Beck's school, young countesses and young bourgeois sit side by side at their desks." However, as the novel progresses, more of Madame Beck's calculating and hypocritical side is revealed. The novel even uses the title of Chapter Thirteen, "An Ill-Timed Sneeze," as evidence of Madame Beck's hypocrisy. As the story deepens, the author's criticism of Madame Beck's hypocrisy is no longer limited to veiled satire but fully portrays her as a villain standing between Lucy and Paul. Lucy's attitude towards Madame Beck's actions shifts from mockery to direct exposure: "Oh, Madame! Your hand is both cold and holding poison. You poison others and paralyze them." "A dog in the manger!" Beneath Madame Beck's gentle exterior lies a complete selfish hedonist. Even towards her own students, Lucy cannot treat them equally. She makes no attempt to hide her disgust for Labassecour girls, mocking them as "this herd of pigs" and comparing them favorably with English girls, praising the latter's gentle nature and diligence in study. Furthermore, Charlotte uses the perspective of non-English people to reflect the superiority of England: "Foreigners say that only English girls can be trusted to travel alone, and they are deeply puzzled by the bold confidence of English parents and guardians." In the café of the hotel in Villette, Lucy finds herself the only lady present: "I suspect that if there was anything unusual in the current situation, they would use this word to explain it: 'English!'" The seemingly strange behavior of the English in the eyes of non-English people is precisely a manifestation of the uniqueness of British social culture, and upon close reading, it is not difficult to detect the author's pride in her writing.

In summary, due to her childhood experiences, Charlotte's writing bears obvious marks of an inferiority complex, which is particularly reflected in her arrangement of the fates of the male and female protagonists in her texts: the female protagonist will ultimately end up with an unremarkable male protagonist. At the same time, as an active writer during the Victorian era, Charlotte Brontë's creations inevitably show contempt for the images of regional "Others" and cultural "Others." This implicit discrimination is shaped both by the era in which she lived and by the influence of the writer's growing environment. She integrated her inferiority complex and the suzerain state's arrogance endowed by the era into her writing, showing the world a self intertwined with inferiority and conceit through her works. The flaws in the "Other" images in Charlotte's works reflect the interaction between Charlotte's inferiority complex and strong national culture.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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