

A WONDERFUL JOURNEY INTO THE FICTIONAL WOODS OF REGENCY AND VICTORIAN PERIOD: FROM LIZZIE BENNET TO JANE EYRE

UMA VIAGEM MARAVILHOSA NOS BOSQUES FICCIONAIS DOS PERÍODOS REGENCIAL E VITORIANO: DE LIZZIE BENNET PARA JANE EYRE

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The reputation of Jane Austen [...] has never been higher. She has not dated: her novels have a freshness and humour sadly lacking in Scott, a delicacy we can appreciate more than his 'big bow-wow style'. The first important woman novelist, she stands above both the classical and romantic movements; in a sense she bridges the gap between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but she can be assigned to no group – she is unique.

Anthony Burgess, English Literature.

In Charlotte's writing, by contrast, these literary modes are far less unified. It is the uneven, heterogeneous nature of her fiction which catches the eye, the way it mixes Gothic, romance, fairy tale, picaresque, ghost story, melodrama and social realism. It is as though the romance or Gothic novel must now come to grips with new kinds of social experience at the heart of early industrial England, and must struggle to accommodate these bleak realities within its symbolic brand of social realism has still not entirely shaken itself loose from more traditional, less realist forms.

Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction*.

ABSTRACT: *This text invites the reader to a journey into the fictional woods of two important authors of English literature: Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë. Through a close reading of Lizzie Bennet and Jane Eyre, this work unfolds the story of two fascinating characters. The first one is from Jane Austen's most famous novel *Pride and Prejudice*, the second from Charlotte Brontë's masterpiece *Jane Eyre*. Their social contexts are not distant. Though Brontë once declared she was not a fan of Austen's stories, I dare say that Lizzie opens a way for Jane to follow. This article puts these characters side by side in order to show their similarities, differences and evolution as women in the English society of the 19th century. The intention is to search in art and literature some symbolic ways of dealing with aspects of real life such as womanhood.*

KEYWORDS: Jane Austen; Charlotte Brontë; English literature; female characters.

RESUMO: *Este texto convida o leitor para um passeio pelos bosques ficcionais de duas autoras importantes na literatura inglesa: Jane Austen e Charlotte Brontë. Através de uma*

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leitura atenta de Lizzie Bennet e Jane Eyre este trabalho desvenda as histórias de duas personagens fascinantes. A primeira vem do romance mais famoso de Jane Austen, Orgulho e Preconceito, a segunda vem da obra-prima de Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre. O contexto social de ambas não é distante. Apesar de Brontë ter declarado uma vez que não era fã da obra de Austen, me atrevo a dizer que Lizzie abriu o caminho para Jane seguir. Nesse sentido, o presente artigo coloca as duas personagens lado a lado para mostrar suas semelhanças, diferenças e evolução como mulheres na sociedade inglesa do século XIX. A intenção é buscar na arte e na literatura algumas formas simbólicas para lidar com certos aspectos da vida real, como o universo feminino.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Jane Austen; Charlotte Brontë; literatura inglesa; personagens femininas.

Introdução

“It is a truth universally acknowledged”², that womanhood is a fascinating universe to explore in a fictional context. Many authors have created wonderful and unforgettable female characters such as Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth, Alice Walker’s Celie, J. K. Rowling’s Hermione Granger, to mention but a few. In fact, not all of them possess a pure soul; Lady Macbeth, for example, has been influencing the creation of evil characters along time. Thus, a great deal of female characters endures their dilemmas with heads up, and in so doing they follow and fight for their ideals and dreams. Celie, in Alice Walker’s *The Colour Purple*, for instance, symbolizes strength and overcoming in an abusive marriage and society. J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* saga presents Hermione Granger as an intelligent, clever and determined girl who uses her attributes to support her friends and fight for justice. This way, I understand that to read those strong women’s stories can be very inspiring and shed light on other possibilities of women roles.

In addition to that, there are many aspects about womanhood that still deserve attention, especially in relation to their position and possibilities in society. Women’s life condition has, for sure, improved along the years, now women can vote, have a professional career, study. However, there is much more to consider and do. Women still face violence, especially in relationships, inequity in professional careers, little representation in the political environment. As a reader and professional of Letters I always believed that art and literature

² From the first line in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*.

are wonderful tools to help shed light on some complex aspects of human lives. Also, I agree with some scholars like Carl Gustav Jung and Umberto Eco, who see symbols, archetypes and fiction as a way of dealing with complicated and important aspects of human essence. Umberto Eco wisely proposes in his book *Six Walks into the Fictional Woods* that,

[...] It is easy to understand why fiction fascinates us. It gives us the opportunity of using our faculties indefinitely to perceive and restore the past. Fiction has the same function of games. By playing, children learn about life, because they simulate situations in which they may act as adults. And it is by fiction that we, adults, exercise our power to structure our past and present experience³. (ECO, 1994, p. 137) (Translation mine)

Accordingly, art and literature help us to deal with delicate issues of our inner soul that reality and reason cannot. In so doing, Eco acknowledges that “the work of fiction retains us within the borders of its world and, in one way or another, makes us take it seriously”⁴ (ECO, 1994, p. 84; translation mine). Furthermore, the author argues that narrative such as myth function as a way of finding a form in the turmoil of human experience (ECO, 1994). Corroborating with this idea, Jung proposes in his text *O Homem e Seus Símbolos* that,

The individual is the only reality. The more we are a part of it to be close to the abstract ideas about Homo sapiens more probabilities we have for mistakes. At this time of social convulsions and drastic changes it is important to know more about the human being, because much depends on his mental and moral qualities. To observe things in its fair perspective we need, however, to understand both the past of man and his present. Hence the essential importance of understanding myths and symbols⁵ (JUNG, 1964, p. 58). (translation mine)

³ In Hildegard Feist’s translation: “é fácil entender por que a ficção nos fascina tanto. Ela nos proporciona a oportunidade de utilizar infinitamente nossas faculdades para perceber o mundo e reconstituir o passado. A ficção tem a mesma função dos jogos. Brincando as crianças aprendem a viver, porque simulam situações em que poderão se encontrar como adultos. E é por meio da ficção que nós, adultos, exercitamos nossa capacidade de estruturar nossa experiência passada e presente”.

⁴ My translation “a obra de ficção nos encerra nas fronteiras de seu mundo e, de uma forma ou de outra, nos faz levá-la a sério”.

⁵ In Maria Lúcia Pinho’s translation “O indivíduo é a realidade única. Quanto mais nos afastamos dele para nos aproximarmos de ideias abstratas sobre o homo sapiens mais probabilidades temos de erro. Nesta época de convulsões sociais e mudanças drásticas é importante sabermos mais a respeito do ser humano, pois muito depende das suas qualidades mentais e morais. Para observarmos as coisas na sua justa perspectiva precisamos, porém, entender tanto o passado do homem quanto o seu presente. Daí a importância essencial de compreendermos mitos e símbolos”. (JUNG, 1964, p. 58).

Jung declares that sometimes it is necessary to go back into past in order to understand a present situation. Through such journey the individual can find some symbols which will help him cope with complicated issues of his reality.

Concerning everything that has been said until now, the intention of this text is to plunge into the universe of two amazing female characters of English Literature that are still inspiring readers and the academy all over the world. In order to reach it, I aim at reading them as symbols of strong women who fought to forge their own destiny in a patriarchal restricted society.

From Jane Austen to Charlotte Brontë

At this moment, this text offers an invitation to a journey into the fictional woods of Regency and Victorian Periods along with two unforgettable authors: Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë. Initially, Austen will conduct us to her rural gentry community and present us to her lovely heroine, Lizzie Bennet, and her dilemma involving marriage hunting. Then, we will embark into a walk along the Victorian woods of restriction and repression led by Brontë and her daring heroine, Jane Eyre.

Some aspects of life might prove hard in Regency period, especially for women. There was this atmosphere of uncertainty, because of the consequences of Industrial and French Revolution which were in course during Austen's time. Also, as Hazel Jones puts it, women's "present and future economic security lay in male hands – fathers', brothers', husbands'" (JONES, 2009, p. 2). Accordingly, the options were few for the female members of rural gentry: either they married, or became a burden to their family, or descended socially and went for jobs as teachers or governesses. The other possibilities were unmentionable. Marriage was the best solution to their predicament. Accomplished young women had a better chance to find good matches. Actually, that society did not give women many opportunities for personal development, differently from the circumstances in our 21st century society, where women can be economically and personally independent. Now women can both marry and have a professional career. Back in Austen's and Brontë's society, the best option for a woman was to get married. However, in order to accomplish that, it was necessary to fulfil some requirements. First, the concept of marriage in those times was different from ours, especially in terms of feelings. Marriage was a kind of market; the bride's family was

expected to give something in return such as a dowry. Love was least in the list of interests involving such trades. Second, people did not act as freely now. People, especially women, should act according to some codes of conduct. And those codes were spread through books named conduct books,⁶ which gave women guidelines to act accordingly. James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1767) and D. John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1767) are some examples of such literature. It is possible to say that Jane Austen was well-acquainted with them. In *Pride and Prejudice* there is a scene in which Mr. Collins reads part of one those books to the Bennets. His intention is to emphasize the importance of feminine behaviour in society. A similar situation happens in *Mansfield Park* in a scene in chapter V where Mary Crawford and Edmund talk about how women should behave when formally presented to society. The idea is that a married woman should be seen as the *angel in the house*, meaning a well-behaved woman who knows how to rule the household and respect her husband and family.

As a matter of fact, Austen's and Brontë's social contexts and literary thematic were restricted to small communities and few characters. However, the authors approach their subjects with different lenses. Austen's narrator seems emotionally more distant, passing the idea of not being too intrusive in readers' conclusions. Austen is well known for her capacity of delineating different types of characters: they may be virtuous with a good nature, or emotionally disturbed, for example, too sensitive, practical, pedantic, selfish, shallow, snobbish, proud, or prejudiced, to mention some tinges.

Brontë brings the reader into her narrative to a degree that no one can be impartial, for instance, when the little Jane is mistreated by her relatives in Gateshead, or by some teachers in Lowood. There is a psychological tone in which feelings and instinct gain force, depending on the situation. As in the scene in the red room in which Jane yells so loud that she frightens Bessie. Also, Brontë's work is rich in metaphoric and symbolic elements such as nature and colours representing the character's emotions and personality. Jane Eyre's mood is sometimes represented by fire, other times by ice, depending on the situation. Bertha Mason, in her turn, is invariably represented by the colour red, which evokes fire and fury.

Unfortunately, Brontë was one year old when Austen died, thus, they did not have the opportunity to know each other. Both lived in historically troubled contexts. Austen lived in

⁶ According to Jane Nardin "the conduct books adumbrate a vision of a perfect society in which social behaviour is the outward manifestation of inward moral commitment. And their vision is highly conservative – their ideal men and women act in ways that are calculated to preserve the existing social hierarchy".

an England ruled by a Prince Regent who was resented by his people because of his extravaganzas with public money. Women's lives were restricted to few possibilities – and, in Brontë's case, restriction and religious conservatism were characteristics of the Victorian Period in which she lived in. If on the one hand, the Regency Period was ruled by a

Prince Regent [who] spent his time indulging in excesses. He spent more money than the treasury could cover on building projects and lavish parties, thus leaving the burden of restocking the coffers to the people he ruled. He was a great patron of the arts and literature and created Regent's Park, but was extravagant in fashion and indulgent with food, becoming quite obese. This reputation of excesses and self-indulgence likely led to Jane Austen dislike him.⁷

On the other hand, there is Queen named Victoria who is often claimed to have been a very good monarch [...] coming in as monarch at a time when there was little respect for the throne, she is credited with bringing some respect back to it.⁸ It seems that the pendulum moves from a period of indulgence to a period of restriction.

Different from Austen, who had a solitary career as a writer, Brontë shares the experience of writing stories with her brother and sisters. By doing so, they create a particular fictional world in order to escape ostracism in a small community by the moors, where they were raised.

Austen signs her work with an anonymous "Written By a Lady"; Brontë used the ambiguous pseudonym "Currer Bell". As Terry Eagleton asserts in *The English Novel: An Introduction*, in Brontë's time a male author had more authority and credibility than a female one, especially when the content of their stories is so polemic as in Brontë's case,

If the Brontë sisters were ethnically divided between Irish and English, they were equally divided as female authors. 'Author' suggests authority, a capacity to speak commandingly in one's own voice, which was for the most part denied to nineteenth-century women. Hence the sisters' custom of concealing their gender behind male pseudonyms, a ploy all the more necessary because of the 'indelicate', indecorous nature of their turbulent texts. For some Victorians, it was bad enough having to read about bigamy, social climbing, grotesque physical violence and interracial marriage without the additional outrage of knowing that a woman's delicate mind lay behind these scandalous subjects. (EAGLETON, 2005, p. 125-126)

⁷ Information available at <https://www.janeausten.org/regency-period.asp>. Accessed on August 29th, 2018.

⁸ Information available at www.victorian-era.org. Accessed on August 29th, 2018.

Concerning the intricacies behind such topics a pen name is really suitable in order to preserve their identities. Eagleton also underlines some dichotomies in the Victorian period which emphasize the idea of women's weakness in a patriarchal society,

The Brontës were not, then, three weird sisters deposited upon the Yorkshire moors from some metaphysical outer space. On the contrary, their lives were shaped by some of the most typical conflicts of early Victorian England – conflicts between rural and urban, colony and metropolis, commercial south and industrial north, female 'sensibility' and male power. (EAGLETON, 2005, p. 127)

Austen's female characters have few possibilities, and marriage was the best possible option. In Brontë's time, things are not much different; on the contrary, a harsh moralistic and religious philosophy restricts women's lives even more. It is possible to say that the excess of the Regency Period and the repression of the Victorian Period set the tone of those authors. In so doing, where excess is underlined the attention is to moral and ethics. Whereas, when everything is repressed the instincts arise and psychological issues prevail as we identify in Jane Eyre's outbursts of anger.

From Lizzie to Jane

Lizzie Bennet and Jane Eyre are unforgettable heroines of English literature; they are products of different times, but grow in similar woods. As mentioned before, their possibilities and positions as women do not suffer drastic changes from one period to the other. However, they handle their challenges differently, considering that their circumstances are distinct. Lizzie, has a family who both embarrasses and supports her, whereas Jane is an orphan forced to solve her dilemmas by herself.

In Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) we meet Elizabeth Bennet whose nickname is Lizzie. She is the second daughter of the Bennets. Lizzie is neither the most beautiful nor the most accomplished daughter, but she is the most intelligent and proud. And these attributes make her, sometimes, too ready to judge people, or to be a little hard with her peers. The initial sentence of the novel sets the tone of the story in terms of thematic and style "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" (AUSTEN, 2001, p.3). Actually, if we take into account the context in which this sentence was written, it is totally ironic. It is not a man who is in want of a wife, but the

contrary. What is presented to us is a mother, Mrs. Bennet, and her five daughters who are excited by the idea that a single rich man is moving into their neighbourhood, because of the possibility of a suitable marriage. Indeed, as the story unfolds, we are introduced to a mother who is desperate to find a husband to her daughters, since their future depends on an appropriate connection. This happens because the girls will not inherit their property when Mr. Bennet dies. Thus, they depend on a suitable marriage in order to escape misery. That said, let us consider Lizzie's attitude towards her circumstances.

Along the narrative Lizzie has three suitors, Mr. Wickham, Mr. Collins, and Mr. Darcy. Two of these men proposed marriage to her. Even though marriage is the best option for Lizzie, she dares to refuse both proposals. Here we have what she says to Mr. Darcy first proposal:

From the very beginning, from the first moment I may almost say, of my acquaintance with you, your manners impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others, were such as to form that ground-work of disapprobation, on which succeeding events have built so immovable a dislike; and I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry (AUSTEN, 2001, p.128).

Although Lizzie is not economically in a comfortable position to refuse a proposal of marriage, she is too proud and determined to accept it just because she needs to marry. Had she accepted Mr. Collins' proposal, she would have saved her family's property. And if she married Mr. Darcy the first time he proposed, she would have become a very rich woman. Elizabeth's pride prevents her from being practical; as she says, "there is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises with every attempt to intimidate me" (AUSTEN, 2001, p. 115). When Elizabeth went to visit her friend Charlotte, she met Colonel Fitzwilliam, and he warned her about the importance of money in marriage, "our habits of expense make us too dependent, and there are not many in rank of life who can afford to marry without some attention to money" (AUSTEN, 2001, p. 121). But this warning does not change Lizzie's mind, because, later on, when Mr. Darcy proposes to her, she refuses him directly. In fact, for Elizabeth, "happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance" (AUSTEN, 2001, p. 16), and this chance falls upon her when she finally manages to change her mind about a number of things, and starts considering Darcy

from a different perspective, until (after visiting Pemberley) she manages to fall in love with him.

In Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) we are presented to a scared and sad girl who has to make her way alone. In this Bildungsroman the protagonist's growth runs through different contexts. In childhood, Jane faces hatred and scorn among her relatives, the Reeds. If she is right or wrong, it does not matter, they mistreat her anyway. When she is sent to Lowood, a boarding school for orphans, she feels lonely, cold and hungry. Nevertheless, the school provides her with a professional formation as a teacher. In youth, she discovers her femininity, passion and madness when she goes to Thornfield to work as the governess of a girl named Adèle. She falls in love with Mr. Rochester, but runs away when she finds out about his secret – he has a mad wife locked in a room. Later, in Marsh End, a place where she finds shelter, she meets a sense of friendship with some newly-found relatives, the Rivers. According to Gilbert & Gubar, Jane Eyre “becomes almost larger than life, the emblem of passionate, barely disguised rebelliousness” (GILBERT & GUBER, 1984, p. 337). As such, this fascinating character does not accept passively the adversities life offers her; instead, she forges her own destiny.

As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar put it, Brontë's novel is

a story of enclosure and escape, a distinctively female *Bildungsroman* in which the problems encountered by the protagonist as she struggles from the imprisonment of her childhood toward an almost unthinkable goal of mature freedom are symptomatic of difficulties Everywoman in a patriarchal society must meet and overcome: oppression (at Gateshead), starvation (at Lowood), madness (at Thornfield), and coldness (at Marsh End). Most important, her confrontation, not with Rochester but with Rochester's mad wife Bertha, is the book's central confrontation [...] not with her own sexuality but with her own imprisoned “hunger, rebellion, and rage,” a secret dialogue of self and soul and whose outcome, as we shall see, the novel's plot, Rochester's fate, and Jane's come-of-age all depend. (GILBERT & GUBER, 1984, p. 339)

This way, Jane Eyre's psychological development undergoes several stages, similar to the journey of the hero in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. In Campbell's book the hero is tested along his journeys in order to grow up. In Austen's novel we do not witness Lizzie's growing process. The protagonist is already a young woman when the story starts. And travelling is not constant in Lizzie's story as in Jane's. But it is possible to say that when Lizzie leaves her comfort zone in Longbourn, she sees things differently. As her

journey to Pemberley proves to help her change her mind and accept Mr. Darcy's second proposal.

Moreover, similar to Austen's novel, the first sentence in *Jane Eyre* is meaningful. As Gilbert & Gubar propose, the first line of a story seems to be casual, however it can carry relevant and symbolic ideas,

Unlike many Victorian novels, which begin with elaborate expository paragraphs, *Jane Eyre* begins with a casual, curiously enigmatic remark: "There was no possibility of taking a walk that day." Both occasion ("that day") and the excursion (or the impossibility of one) are significant: the first is the real beginning of Jane's pilgrim's progress toward maturity; the second is a metaphor for the problems she must solve in order to attain maturity". (GUILBERT & GUBER, 1984, p. 339)

Actually, it is interesting to consider these novels' introductory phrases, since they set the tone of both stories. If Jane Austen is ironic and practical with her first sentence, Brontë employs symbolism and metaphor to present her story and convey meaning.

Conclusion

Considering Lizzie Bennet's and Jane Eyre's stories, it is possible to say they are inspiring heroines who represents some aspects of nineteenth-century English literature. They represent strong female figures and characters that endure a hard life with their heads up. In this sense, they prove to be different from most of their predecessors who were fragile and faint before difficult situations. Through personal dilemmas Lizzie and Jane demonstrate, symbolically, that women can be strong and forge their own destinies, in spite of the restrictions of their time.

Lizzie dares refuse two proposals, in spite of understanding that marriage is one of the few possibilities of social and economic placement for a woman in her society. And this is a great risk, considering she might become a spinster, and risk the welfare of her whole family. Lizzie shows frankness and fights for what she thinks was right. However, she reviews her positions in the end, when she realizes that her first impressions towards Mr. Darcy were mistaken and prejudiced. Concerning Jane Eyre, it is possible to say that she follows Lizzie's steps. Jane has to fight for a place and a position, from childhood. Differently from Lizzie, marriage is less crucial for Jane; at first, because she has more immediate needs in her fight

for survival; and later, after she inherits a small fortune from a late uncle, she has no financial need to marry. Jane has endured so many adversities along her life by herself, and managed to survive, so that she represents a new sort of woman, who will marry only if she feels she has found a person she really feels affection for. Jane Eyre does not approach marriage the same way Austen's characters do. However, affection is a point in common between them. Both characters marry because of social conventions, and for love too. After undergoing a great deal of misfortunes, Jane ends up marrying Mr. Rochester, and her reason to do so is that she loves him. Jane fought disdain in Gateshead, hunger and cold in Lowood, madness in Thornfield and coldness in Marsh End, to finally give herself and Mr. Rochester a second chance. As Anthony Burgess proposes, Charlotte Brontë's "*Jane Eyre* is one of the really significant Victorian novels [...] a genuine love-story of great realism, full of sharp observation and not without wit" (BURGESS, 1990, p. 186). And marriage, according to Eagleton represents "the union of the subjective and objective. It is the place where social forms and moral values most vitally intersect" (EAGLETON, 2005, p.120). I come to the conclusion that both stories, Lizzie's and Jane's, follow this idea offered by Eagleton. They unite subjective and objective reasons for their actions, as well as social forms and moral values.

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