

Study of Mrs. Reed's Multi-dimensional Image from the Perspective of Sigmund Freud's Personality Structure Theory

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Abstract: *Jane Eyre* is a classic written by British female writer Charlotte Brontë. In this paper, the author makes a comprehensive analysis of a minor character in the novel, Mrs. Reed. It is found that Mrs. Reed is a hard-hearted and cruel aunt, a doting mother and a jealous wife. Then, Freud's personality structure theory is employed to interpret Mrs. Reed's multi-faceted image. Firstly, Mrs. Reed is influenced by the "id" factor which makes her indulgent in her own nature, unconstrained by social rules, and behave as a hard-hearted, jealous and doting woman. Secondly, "ego" factor also shapes Mrs. Reed's image as Mrs. Reed does show humanity occasionally under the rules and pressures of reality. In order to adapt to the social environment and cope with external pressures, Mrs. Reed displays a multifaceted and complicated personality in different situations.

Keywords: *Jane Eyre*; Mrs. Reed's Image; Freud's Personality Structure Theory.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Plot of *Jane Eyre*

Jane Eyre, first published in 1847, is an autobiographical novel written by the British female writer Charlotte Brontë. It tells the story of an orphan girl, Jane Eyre. Jane's parents died when she was young and then she was placed under foster care in her uncle's (on her mother's side) house. However, after her uncle's early death, Jane was under constant abuse by her cousins and hated by her aunt even though she was very cautious and extremely obedient. When she was ten years old, a big fight broke out between Jane and her cousin John Reed. Jane's first rebellion frightened and irritated her aunt Mrs. Reed who immediately confined Jane to a red room that very night and later sent Jane away to Lowood School. The living environment was very harsh at the boarding school but Jane survived tenaciously.

Two years after graduating, Jane applied for a job as a governess at Thornfield to make her living. Mr. Rochester, the owner of Thornfield, was deeply attracted by Jane's independent spirit and eventually proposed to Jane. However, during the wedding at the church, Jane was pained to discover that Rochester was already married and his mad wife Bertha Antoinette Mason was confined at the attic of Thornfield. Heartbroken at the news, Jane departed silently but resolutely. Later, Jane learned that her long-separated uncle (on her father's side), John Eyre, died of illness and bequeathed her a huge fortune. Unable to forget Mr. Rochester, she returned to Thornfield only to learn that Mr. Rochester became blind due to the fire set by his mad wife at the attic a few months earlier. Jane chose to stay to take care of Rochester for the rest of her life. Under Jane's care, one of Rochester's eyes was healed. They finally got married and gave birth to a baby boy.

Jane Eyre has long been regarded as a representative work of feminism and occupies an extremely important position in the field of women's literature. Later writers have been influenced by this work when dealing with female issues. In this paper, the author shall take a minor character Mrs. Reed as the research object and make a comprehensive analysis of her image.

1.2. Traditional Female Images in the British Victorian Society

The Victorian era was a time of stringent societal conventions. During the Victorian period, it was believed that women were inferior to men both mentally and physically. Women were expected to be submissive, passive, pious and obedient. There was a distinct delineation between the role of men and that of women.

Victorian men were expected to demonstrate fortitude, rationality, self-discipline, and responsibility, though they are also required to follow the etiquette and moral norms of society. Socially, men are often seen as the main economic pillar and authority figure in the family, with the power to control women. At the same time, men are expected to succeed in education, career, and socialization to prove their value and status. While the social rules for women are more strict. For unmarried women, they are expected to maintain chastity before marriage and wear conservatively. They are not allowed to stay or talk alone with men. For married women, they are expected to be devoted wives and caring mothers whose duty is to keep the home clean, cook food and take care of children and husbands. In a word, their life should be family-centered.

2. Sigmund Freud's Personality Structure Theory

According to Freud's personality structure theory, personality is a psychological mechanism that controls human behaviors. The internal psychological mechanism determines a person's behavior in all given situations. Freud believed that the complete personality structure consists of three parts: "id", "ego" and "superego".

"id" refers to the instinctive self -living in a chaotic world. A person's messy, unstable, instinctive and repressed desire are fully displayed as those undeveloped instinctive impulses are out of control of the ethics, morals and legal norms of modern human society. "Id" follows the "pleasure principle". Living in the id world, a person has no sense of good and evil

and he/she would pay any price to satisfy his/her own needs.

“Ego” is the self living in reality. It is developed through acquired learning and contact with the environment. It is part of the consciousness structure. The “ego” plays a mediating role between the “id” and the external environment. It pursues the principle of reality. On the one hand, “ego” tries to satisfy the “id” needs, on the other hand, it tries to stop behaviors that may violate social norms, moral principles and laws.

“Superego” is the moralized self. It is an imitation of social models, formed under the influence of cultural traditions, values and social ideals. It follows ideal principles, determines the standard of moral behavior through self-example (that is, conscience and self-ideal), punishes behaviors that violate moral standards through conscience and a strong sense of guilty.

3. Mrs. Reed’s Multi-dimensional Image

3.1. A Hard-hearted and Cruel Aunt

Mrs. Reed is a hard-hearted and cruel aunt to Jane, which can be fully demonstrated through her attitudes towards Jane on the fight between Jane and her son John Reed.

“Oh, aunt, it’s all right! Spare me! I can’t stand it, punish me in some other way! It’s going to kill me, if—

“Shut up! It’s disgusting.”

There’s no doubt she really felt that way. She saw me as a precocious actor and she really saw me as a character who was both thoughtful and mean-spirited, sinister and terrifying. I was in great pain and weeping so badly that Mrs. Reed was impatient, as soon as Betsy and Abbott were gone, she pushed me into the house without saying a word, locked the door and said no more to me. I heard her stride away, shortly after she left, I thought I probably had a fainting, and the dispute ended in my unconsciousness.” (Charlotte Bronte, p.16)

The above excerpt is about the consequence of Jane’s resistance to John Reed’s beating. After being locked into the red house, Jane experienced unprecedented fear and cried for help, which was responded by Mrs. Reed’s rebuke “Shut up! It’s disgusting.” and brutal treatment “pushed me into the house without saying a word, locked the door and said no more to me.” From these, we can find Mrs. Reed was hard-hearted and cruel as she showed little care for Jane’s suffering.

“Mrs. Reed regained her composure soon and she grabbed me and shook me with all her might, slapped me from side to side, and then went away without saying a word.” (Charlotte Bronte, p.29) From this excerpt we can also see the ferocity and cruelty of Mrs. Reed clearly.

3.2. A Doting Mother

Mrs. Reed is a doting mother who spoiled her three children when they were young. Due to Mrs. Reed’s indulgence, her three children were never on good terms and the only son even came to a terrible ending.

In Jane Eyre’s eyes, John was a stupid and rude boy who often bullied and abused her, but “Mrs. Reed, in such matters, always pretended to be deaf and dumb, She never saw him hit me and she never heard him scold me” (Charlotte Bronte, p.5). “Eliza, who, was headstrong and selfish, was respected. Georgiana, who had a spoiled temper, a very acrid spite, a captious and insolent carriage, was universally indulged. Her beauty, her pink cheeks and golden curls, seemed to give delight to all who, looked at her, and to purchase indemnity for every fault. John no one thwarted, much less punished;

though he twisted the necks of the pigeons, killed the little pea-chicks, set the dogs at the sheep, stripped the hothouse vines of their fruit, and broke the buds off the choicest plants in the conservatory: he called his mother ‘old girl,’ too; sometimes reviled her for her dark skin, similar to his own; bluntly disregarded her wishes; not unfrequently tore and spoiled her silk attire; and he was still ‘her own darling’.” (Charlotte Bronte, p.13).

Eight years later, Jane returned to Thornfield under her poor aunt’s call. She was sad to find that due to her aunts’ ignorance and doting, her three cousins were reduced to be a loser, a swinger, and an ascetic respectively. “he ruined his health and his estate amongst the worst men and the worst women. He got into debt and into jail: his mother helped him out twice, but as soon as he was free he returned to his old companions and habits. His head was not strong: the knaves he lived amongst fooled him beyond anything I ever heard.” (Charlotte Bronte, p.283). This is John Reed’s tragic ending. “she had favoured me with a description of the brilliant winter she had spent in London two seasons ago- of the admiration she had there excited- the attention she had received ... The communications were renewed from day to day: they always ran on the same theme- herself, her loves, and woes. It was strange she never once adverted either to her mother’s illness, or her brother’s death, or the present gloomy state of the family prospects.” (Charlotte Bronte, p.298). This is about the vain Georgiana. “Eliza told me when her mother died she would execute a long-cherished project: seek a retirement where punctual habits would be permanently secured from disturbance, and place safe barriers between herself and a frivolous world.” (Charlotte Bronte, p.299). This is about selfish and ascetic Eliza.

As can be seen, under Mrs. Reed’s doting, her three children had been nearly ruined, and no one cared for her as she lay in deathbed.

3.3. A Jealous Wife

Mrs. Reed is a jealous wife, which can be demonstrated from her attitudes towards Jane Eyre’s mother.

“I had a dislike to her mother always; for she was my husband’s only sister, and a great favorite with him: he opposed the family’s disowning her when she made her low marriage; and when news came of her death, he wept like a simpleton. He would send for the baby; though I entreated him rather to put it out to nurse and pay for its maintenance. I hated it the first time I set my eyes on it- a sickly, whining, pining thing! It would wail in its cradle all night long- not screaming heartily like any other child, but whimpering and moaning. Reed pitied it; and he used to nurse it and notice it as if it had been his own: more, indeed, than he ever noticed his own at that age. He would try to make my children friendly to the little beggar: the darlings could not bear it, and he was angry with them when they showed their dislike. In his last illness, he had it brought continually to his bedside; and but an hour before he died, he bound me by vow to keep the creature.” (Charlotte Bronte, p.295-296)

Mr. Reed objected to the family’s refusal to accept his sister and her marriage but Mrs. Reed thought that she had “lowered her status and married”. Mr. Reed devoted much of his passion and love to his sister and niece and less to Mrs. Reed and her children, which aroused Mrs. Reed’s envy and therefore unfair and ill-treatment towards Jane.

4. Factors Shaping Mrs. Reed's Image

4.1. The Indulgent "Id"

Although there is no direct and explicit explanation of Mrs. Reed's family background, there are still some hints in the novel. Mrs. Reed used to curse Jane Eyre and her husband Mr. Reed, proudly declaring that her son John is like her, like her brothers, a full Gibson family, which shows that Mrs. Reed is a Gibson girl probably coming from an ordinary family. However, through marriage with Mr. Reed, Mrs. Reed became a wealthy mistress with a high social status. After Mr. Reed's death, Mrs. Reed became the head of the family and her arrogant and fierce nature was fully revealed.

After Mr. Reed's death, Mrs. Reed's behaviors are mainly driven by her personal nature free from restrictions of social rules, which can be proved by her attitude towards Jane Eyre. Due to her prejudice against Jane's origin and social status, Mrs. Reed took a harsh and unjust approach to Jane Eyre. Although society rules may require Mrs. Reed to be more tolerant and merciful towards Jane, the prejudice and arrogance rooted in her heart prevented her from doing so. On the one hand, she treats Jane in a harsh and domineering manner, while on the other hand, Mrs. Reed indulges her children to bully Jane and tell lies, proudly believing that she is correcting Jane's vices and doing the right thing. In fact, her ill-treatments towards Jane and her doting on her own children reveal her true nature and instinctive desires.

4.2. A Rational Ego

Throughout the novel, Mrs. Reed only did two good deeds: the first deed is raising Jane Eyre until she was ten years old by following her husband's will and the second deed is informing Jane Eyre of her inheritance rights. These two acts were not in keeping with Mrs. Reed's nature (id) and thus Mrs. Reed was extremely unwilling to do both things. She did such acts of kindness purely because of the constraints or pressures of social rules. Although Mrs. Reed hated Jane Eyre at the bottom of her heart, she may have become aware of the rules of morality and social laws. Finally, Mrs. Reed decided to inform Jane Eyre of her inheritance on her deathbed.

Under rules of morality and social laws, Mrs. Reed must observe her husband's will to raise Jane Eyre. Once, Jane was confined to the red room and she cried out her uncle's name under extreme fear and desperation. The mention of Mr. Reed's name greatly shocked Mrs. Reed as Mrs. Reed knew

clearly that she didn't fully keep her husband's promise to take good care of Jane Eyre. Though Mrs. Reed disliked Jane, she didn't send Jane away immediately after Mr. Reed's death but wait until Jane admitted by herself that she was eager to leave Gateshead Hall. Mrs. Reed tries to maintain her image of being a kind-hearted and generous aunt to the public.

As can be seen, driven by external pressure and personal hatred, Mrs. Reed still kept her promise to her deceased husband and always maintained her image as a "good aunt" to the public.

5. Conclusion

In *Jane Eyre*, Mrs. Reed is a controversial figure and a multi-faceted image. She is a hard-hearted and cruel aunt to Jane Eyre, a doting mother to her own children and a jealous wife to her husband. According to Freud's theory of personality structure, Mrs. Reed's behaviors are mostly controlled by her indulgent "id" following the pleasure principle and partly regulated by her "ego" under the constraints and pressures of social morality and laws. Mrs. Reed was struggling between her inner nature and external forces. Through the study of Mrs. Reed's Multi-dimensional Image from the perspective of Sigmund Freud's personality structure theory, we can see a vivid three-dimensional image of Mrs. Reed, which is an exact product of the Victorian era. Through this study, we could get a better understanding of the life of Victorian women.

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