Journal of Education and Educational Research
ISSN: 2957-9465 | Vol. 9, No. 1, 2024

Study of Helen Burns's Image in Jane Eyre

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Abstract: In this paper, a comprehensive analysis of Helen Burns' character has been conducted. It is evident that Helen embodies intelligence, kindness, and tolerance. The primary factors that shaped her character are, firstly, Lowood School and her familial environment. These formative environments endowed Helen with a forbearance towards inequity. Secondly, her unwavering pursuit of knowledge cultivated her intelligence and wisdom. Lastly, religion had a significant impact on her, instilling in her a willingness to accept any punishment. Through careful examination of this character, one can also gain insight into the traits of women and the challenges they faced within the societal context of that era.

Keywords: Jane Eyre; Helen Burns; Image

1. Introduction

Charlotte Brontë, an esteemed English wordsmith of the 19th century, penned *Jane Eyre*, a seminal text in Western literature. Born the third of six children to Reverend Patrick Brontë and his wife within a span of six years, Brontë's early life was marred by the loss of her mother during her childhood, plunging her family into a mire of hardship and despair. Despite these formidable life challenges, she remained spirited, drawing comfort and motivation from her fervent love for literature. Charlotte's personal journey significantly influenced the creation of *Jane Eyre*. Firstly, her experiences at boarding school and her tenure as a governess provided rich materials for the narrative of *Jane Eyre*. Secondly, the social climate in which Charlotte lived served as a proper setting to expose the societal oppression and injustices perpetrated against women of that era. Besides, Helen Burns, a minor character in the novel, was crafted as a tribute to her sister Maria. Like Helen, Maria was endowed with intelligence but was plagued by misfortune. She was physically fragile and faced repeated punishments for perceived negligence after attending Cowan Bridge School. Typhus was rampant in the school during her third year. Tragically, she contracted lung disease and succumbed to it shortly thereafter.

Charlotte was particularly empathetic towards the plight of women, championing their rights and striving for equitable status alongside men. Her literary philosophy also displayed a steadfast commitment to realism. She firmly believed that literature should mirror societal realities, exposing the complexities and contradictions inherent in human nature. This tenet is masterfully reflected in her masterpiece, *Jane Eyre*.

1.1. About Jane Eyre

Jane Eyre meticulously depicts the life of orphaned girl, Jane Eyre. Adopted by her uncle, Mr. Reed and then upon his demise, she came under the guardianship of Mrs. Reed, who, along with her offspring, subjected Jane to maltreatment. Consequently, she was sent to Lowood Boarding School, an orphanage presided over by the stringent Calvinist minister, Mr. Brocklehurst. Within the institution's walls, Jane held her teacher, Miss Temple, in high esteem and forged a cherished bond with Helen Burns. However, following Miss Temple's departure, Jane sought a job at Thornfield Hall, assuming the role of governess to Adele. The proprietor of Thornfield, Mr. Rochester, soon returned and devoted considerable time to acquainting himself with Jane. Their mutual affection blossomed into a deep love, culminating in their resolve to wed. However, the revelation of Rochester's mad wife thwarted their union. Unwilling to become Rochester's mistress, Jane resolutely left Thornfield Hall. Despite her physical absence, the memory of Rochester lingered, ultimately compelling her return to Thornfield, leading to their eventual union.

In Jane's life, Helen played the role of both a friend and counselor. Helen's virtues of resilience, wisdom, and humility left an indelible imprint on Jane. Though Helen's appearances in the narrative were fleeting, her influence was profound, guiding Jane's educational pursuits and personal transformation. With an unconventional approach, Helen aided Jane in uncovering her life's purpose and urged her to pursue it with unwavering resolve. The lessons imparted by Helen, characterized by her kindness and empathy, empowered Jane to surmount the constraints and societal biases that had previously confined her, enabling her to ultimately recognize and embrace the value of her own existence.

1.2. Traditional Female Image During the British Victorian Era

The Victorian era in British history is commonly demarcated as the period spanning from roughly 1820 to 1914. During this epoch, females were perceived as humble, docile, and principally dedicated to domesticity. (Wang, 2021). Their societal standing was significantly secondary to that of men, who were regarded as the loci of power at that juncture.

For young ladies of the Victorian age, the societal expectation was to wed affluent gentlemen. Consequently, they were obliged to adhere to stringent codes of morality and decorum. Maintaining an appropriate appearance was imperative, and their social interactions were predominantly confined to domestic spaces, religious institutions, and philanthropic organizations. Engaging in unchaperoned interactions with members of the opposite sex was strictly prohibited.

Married women, on the other hand, were the nucleus of the family unit, embodying the ideals of a virtuous wife and maternal figure. Pursuit of higher education or participation in the workforce was deemed inappropriate for them. (Gökçek, 2020). Furthermore, they were expected to exhibit

unquestioning compliance and subservience to male figures of authority, including fathers, spouses, and brothers.

2. Helen Burns's Image

2.1. A Girl with Extensive Knowledge

Helen Burns was an exceptional student at the Lowood school, where her intellectual prowess frequently astonished Jane Eyre. Despite others' inability to grasp complex issues, Helen possessed a remarkable ability to solve them, though this was often overlooked by her instructors. "Her memory seemed to have retained the substance of the whole lesson, and she was ready with answers on every point." (Brontë, p.87).

Helen's profound love for knowledge and her desire for novel ideas drove her to read extensively and develop her own perspective on various matters (Yu et al., 2012). Her extensive reading had equipped her with a unique viewpoint on problems, which sometimes proved difficult for Jane to comprehend. Nevertheless, their conversations fueled Jane's ambition and curiosity. A memorable moment captured by Brontë (1992) illustrates this vividly:

> But my amazement reached its climax when Miss Temple asked Helen if she sometimes snatched a moment to recall the Latin her father had taught her, and taking a book from a shelf, bade her read and construe a page of Virgil; and Helen obeyed, my organ of veneration expanding at every sounding line. (Brontë, 1992, p.121).

Helen's familiarity with French and her capacity to perform word-for-word translations of Latin works, such as those of Virgil, underscored her erudition and intelligence. In Jane's eyes, Helen was nothing less than a genius. Yet, Helen's brilliance was not confined to book learning; she was also adept at gleaning wisdom from life experiences and the insights of others, which enriched her understanding of the world. For example, she could talk to Miss Temple about all sorts of things. "They conversed of things I had never heard of; of nations and times past; of countries far away; of secrets of nature discovered or guessed at." (Brontë, p.120). Her approach to learning from life demonstrates the depth and thoroughness of her inquiry. She believed that knowledge illuminates one's path in life, prompting her to seek it out with unwavering enthusiasm and perseverance. Her quest for knowledge also shaped her character; she confronted challenges and injustices with equanimity and reason, and she extended kindness and compassion towards others.

2.2. A Girl with a Loving Heart

Beneath Helen Burns's seemingly frigid exterior resided a heartwarmingly tender soul. Her encouragement and commendation of Jane, as well as her affection for Miss Temple, exemplified this warmth. When Mr. Brocklehurst forbade any forms of interaction with Jane, it was Helen who provided solace. Instead of distancing herself, she not only secretly delivered sustenance to Jane Eyre but also bolstered her resolve to confront life's trials through both word and deed. Such sincere support and concern clearly revealed Helen's nature as a compassionate individual. Her innate kindness dispelled Jane's sense of isolation, offering security during moments of vulnerability. Helen's impact on Jane was profound, serving as a beacon of strength and empowerment.

Another instance of Helen's wisdom was her counsel to Jane to forgive Mrs. Reed: "Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you and despitefully use you." (Brontë, p.95). Helen's advice was rooted in the belief that everyone is flawed and that forgiveness is essential. Her sincerity towards all had a transformative effect on Jane Eyre, prompting a shift from resentment to reconciliation (Liu & Yu, 2002). Helen's understanding of human nature acted as a catalyst for Jane's personal growth and inspiration.

Moreover, Helen's approach to death reflected the inherent goodness of her spirit. Struck by the plague, Helen faced her mortality with remarkable serenity, comforting Jane with the assurance that death is an inevitable and universal occurrence. She perceived her illness as gentle and gradual, granting her peace of mind. Helen held the conviction that upon her passing, she would join the divine, and her youthful perspective shielded her from the fear of the inevitable. These aspects of Helen's character collectively inspired Jane throughout her life. Though Helen passed away peacefully in the morning, her legacy of courage, patience, and kindness endured within Jane.

2.3. A Girl with Great Tolerance

Helen Burns devoted much of her free time to the pursuit of literature. Scholars have identified her as a devout follower of Christ's teachings, a belief that fostered her exceptional tolerance in the face of injustice. Consider this excerpt from Jane Eyre:

> "Cruel? Not at all! She is severe: she dislikes my faults."... ..."Probably you would do nothing of the sort: but if you did, Mr. Brocklehurst would expel you from the school; that would be a great grief to your relations. It is far better to endure patiently a smart which nobody feels but yourself, than to commit a hasty action whose evil consequences will extend to all connected with you; and besides, the Bible bids us return good for evil." ... ... "Yet it would be your duty to bear it, if you could not avoid it. It is weak and silly to say you cannot bear what it is your fate to be required to bear." I heard her with wonder. I could not comprehend this doctrine of endurance, and still less could I understand or sympathise with the forbearance she expressed for her chastiser. (Brontë, p.91)

Helen's perspective on Miss Scatcherd as "strict" rather than "cruel" is clear; she took responsibility for her own mistakes. When Jane expressed her dislike for Miss Scatcherd, Helen did not react with anger but instead encouraged Jane to engage with the New Testament. Helen understood that the Bible teaches balance between good and evil. This principle led her to exhibit remarkable tolerance towards the adversities she faced.

Despite encountering unfair treatment and mockery from others, Helen maintained her composure and forbearance. She confronted her challenging circumstances with equanimity, harboring no resentment. In the unforgiving environment of the school, she silently bore injustice, resisting the urge to voice her complaints or anger, a testament to her humble demeanor that belied her resilient spirit and profound tolerance.

Furthermore, Helen Burns's religious faith mirrored her capacity for tolerance. As a dedicated Christian, she believed that salvation was attained through patience and forbearance. She embodied the true essence of tolerance -preserving inner peace and kindness irrespective of the challenges she

encountered.

3. Factors Shaping Helen Burns's Image

3.1. Adverse Growth Environment

Helen resided in Lowood School, a religious charitable institution that provided refuge for many orphans and children from impoverished backgrounds. "And it has been observed in every arrangement connected with the establishment of Lowood: plain fare, simple attire, unsophisticated accommodations, hardy and active habits; such is the order of the day in the house and its inhabitants." (Brontë, p.54). The living conditions at Lowood were harsh, with unpalatable food, cramped quarters, and substandard facilities. Compounding these challenges, the school was known for its stringent discipline and severe punishments, which exacted considerable psychological toll on the children. Nevertheless, amidst such adversity, Helen acquired the virtues of independence and resilience at an early age.

The influence of Helen's family of origin was also profoundly formative. Although the narrative offered scant detail regarding her family background, certain inferences could be drawn. At a tender age, she was bereft of her mother and was subsequently sent to Lowood by her father, who seldom demonstrated concern for her welfare and pursued remarriage, events that significantly shaped her experiences and worldview.

Helen Burns was deeply affected by her familial circumstances and the trials of her time at Lowood School. Firstly, she learned the skills necessary to persevere in a harsh environment; at Lowood, she endured scarcity of sustenance and rest, and lacked her father's care-trials that honed her resolve and adaptability. Secondly, through her personal tribulations, she cultivated an intimate understanding of the complexity and diversity inherent in human nature, which refined her perspective on life and morality. Consequently, she approached others with an inherent kindness and benevolence.

3.2. The Pursuit of Knowledge

At Lowood School, Helen exhibited an insatiable thirst for knowledge and an unwavering commitment to learning. Despite the institution's challenging conditions and limited educational offerings, she never relinquished her quest for wisdom. Recognizing the paramount importance of education, she declared to Jane, "No! why should I? I was sent to Lowood to get an education; and it would be of no use going away until I have attained that object." (Brontë, p.90). This statement underscores Helen's profound reverence for learning; she is highly enthusiastic in her pursuit and unwilling to give up any opportunity to further her education.

Furthermore, Helen's scholarly endeavors were not solely confined to the academic absorption of textbook material; she also harbored a sharp curiosity about her surroundings. Preferring to scrutinize everything before her and ponder its underlying principles and implications, her inherent inquisitiveness propelled her to persistently question and seek answers, thus continually expanding her intellectual horizons.

As such, knowledge had a transformative impact on Helen. Firstly, her significant cognitive advancements enabled her to apprehend the world and herself with greater depth. Over time, Helen's education fostered her development of distinctive thoughts and perspectives, maturing into an informed young woman. Secondly, knowledge substantially enriched Helen's spiritual growth and contentment. Amidst the demanding and constrictive environment of Lowood School, her spirit found refuge and fortitude in learning. Through her ardor for knowledge, she discovered her self-worth and significance, as well as a means of engaging with the wider world.

3.3. Religious Piety

Helen Burns was a devout follower of Christianity, a faith that profoundly influenced her demeanor. Her unwavering piety and submission to the divine will inclined her to endure injustice with stoic silence rather than confront it with valor. This disposition was exemplified when, despite being subjected to Miss Scatcherd's insults, Helen maintained an immutable quietude. She harbored the belief that only barbarians and pagans would voice complaints or resist punishment (Liu, 2014). Consequently, she felt responsible for her own chastisement. Another poignant instance is her conviction that her suffering must be borne without thought of retaliation, her sole aspiration being to "go home-to my eternal home" (Fan, 2003). It is evident from these sentiments that Helen bore the burden of her Christian beliefs deeply. She perceived death as an inevitable occurrence, which, while outwardly appearing as an optimistic state of mind, was in reality an escape facilitated by her religious tenets. To a certain extent, Helen Burns's perspectives and actions were circumscribed by her religious beliefs.

However, Helen's religious influence was not without its advantages. Firstly, her faith provided her with spiritual solace and support. Her ability to maintain inner serenity and resilience amidst the trying conditions of Lowood School was largely attributable to her faith. She acknowledged the presence of God and understood that suffering was an essential step on the path to redemption. Owing to her belief, she remained optimistic and cheerful in adversity, which enabled her to navigate life's tribulations more effectively. Secondly, her religious conviction also shaped Helen Burns's compassionate and kind-hearted nature. Deeply affected by the Christian edict to "love thy neighbor as thyself," she was consistently filled with empathy and compassion for others. Even after enduring harsh punishment and unfair treatment, she never nurtured resentment or sought retribution, opting instead for forgiveness and tolerance.

4. Conclusion

Helen Burns, though a minor character in *Jane Eyre*, holds an irreplaceable role. Her intellect shines through her voracious appetite for learning. Despite her unfavorable upbringing, Helen endured many injustices with remarkable forbearance. Her kindness, deeply rooted in Christian principles, reflects her devout faith. Moreover, her relentless pursuit of knowledge marks her as an exceptionally wise individual.

Three primary influences have sculpted Helen's character: her adverse growth environment, her insatiable thirst for knowledge, and her staunch religious beliefs. The absence of parental affection, coupled with the harsh environment of Lowood School, fostered in her an extraordinary tolerance and benevolence towards all. Undeterred by her harsh circumstances, Helen's knowledge was extensive, driven by her insatiable thirst for knowledge. Additionally, her deep-seated Christianity had a profound impact, leading her to

exhibit hesitancy in resistance and a spirit of obedience. An exploration of these three facets offers a more comprehensive understanding of Helen's portrayal.

In essence, Helen is a well-rounded character within the novel. She not only imparts a wealth of wisdom to Jane but also serves as a foil to Jane's rebellious nature. Furthermore, she critiques the societal norms of her time, providing readers with valuable insights.

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