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LINGUISTIC MEANS OF DESCRIBING THE NATIONAL
PICTURE AND HISTORICAL ERA IN "JANE EYRE" BY
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the linguistic means Charlotte Brontë employs in Jane Eyre to depict the national character and historical context of early Victorian England. Through detailed analysis of narrative voice, diction, imagery, and dialogue, the study explores how language reflects the social structures, religious values, gender roles, and imperial attitudes of the 19th century. By focusing on the stylistic and cultural dimensions of Brontë's language, the research highlights how Jane Eyre serves not only as a personal narrative but also as a linguistic representation of its era.

Introduction

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is often celebrated for its emotional depth, complex characters, and exploration of gender and morality. But beyond its compelling story, the novel also offers a rich and detailed picture of 19th-century English life. Through her use of language, from vivid imagery and dialogue to narrative voice and stylistic choices, Brontë brings to life the national character of Victorian England and the historical realities of her time. This thesis looks closely at the linguistic tools Brontë uses to describe both the world around Jane and the era she lives in.

Many scholars have explored *Jane Eyre* from different angles. In their influential work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that Brontë uses language as a way for Jane to resist and redefine the restrictive roles imposed on women. Other researchers, like Michael Toolan (1998), have examined the novel through a linguistic lens, showing how Brontë's sentence structures and vocabulary choices reflect deeper power dynamics and social attitudes.

There's also been significant interest in the novel's historical and political context. Critics like Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton have discussed how the novel reflects class tensions and religious debates in Victorian society. Postcolonial scholars, such as Gayatri Spivak, have drawn attention to how Brontë uses language to portray non-European characters like Bertha Mason, raising questions about race and empire in 19th-century British literature.

While much of this research has focused on *what* Brontë is saying, this thesis focuses more on *how* she says it. Specifically, it will explore the linguistic choices, in vocabulary, imagery, syntax, and dialogue, that help create a vivid picture of English national identity and the

historical moment in which the story is set. By looking at the language itself, we can gain a deeper understanding of how *Jane Eyre* functions not only as a personal story, but also as a reflection of its time and place.

I. The socio-historical context of *Jane Eyre*

When *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847, England was undergoing enormous social and cultural changes. The novel emerged in the heart of the Victorian era, a time defined by strict social hierarchies, deep religious convictions, growing industrialization, and expanding imperial power. It was also a period when the roles and rights of women were limited and closely monitored by societal expectations. These broader historical forces are not just the backdrop of the novel; they shape its characters, their relationships, and even the language they use.

Brontë's heroine, Jane, is born into a world where class and gender sharply limit her opportunities. As an orphaned girl without wealth or connections, she occupies one of the lowest rungs in society. Yet she's educated, intelligent, and morally strong, traits that challenge the passive, submissive ideal of Victorian womanhood. Her position as a governess, a respectable yet socially ambiguous role, places her in the uncomfortable space between the upper class and the working class. This tension is reflected not only in her experiences but in the language, she uses: precise, reflective, and often restrained, mirroring the internal conflicts of someone caught between independence and obedience.

Mr. Rochester, on the other hand, represents a different side of Victorian society, the landed gentry, tied to wealth, power, and Britain's colonial interests. His mysterious past and fortune are linked to the West Indies, a detail that brings imperial history into the narrative. Rochester's language often shifts between passionate, commanding, and sarcastic, reflecting both his social authority and inner turmoil.

Then there is Bertha Mason, Rochester's wife from the colonies. Her portrayal, though deeply problematic by modern standards, speaks volumes about 19th-century attitudes toward race, madness, and the "foreign other." She is described through dehumanizing and exoticized terms, a reflection of Britain's colonial fears and prejudices. Her presence in the novel is a stark reminder of the empire's reach, even in remote English manors like Thornfield Hall.

Religion also plays a central role in shaping characters and themes. The novel presents a spectrum of religious figures: from the harsh moralism of Mr. Brocklehurst to the quiet, saintly endurance of Helen Burns, and the cold self-denial of St. John Rivers. These characters reflect the religious debates of the time, especially between Evangelicalism, Anglican tradition, and emerging rationalist thought. Jane's own moral and spiritual language, deeply rooted in the Christian ethos of her era, shows her grappling with these influences as she searches for a sense of purpose and justice.

In all of this, Brontë uses language not just to tell a story, but to embed the reader in a specific national and historical setting. The words her characters speak, the landscapes they describe, the moral dilemmas they face, all are steeped in the realities of 19th-century England. Through her linguistic choices, Brontë paints a picture of a society in transition: holding tightly to its traditions while slowly being pushed toward change. It is this delicate balance between individual voice and historical moment that makes *Jane Eyre* such a powerful reflection of its time.

II. Linguistic means conveying the national picture

Brontë's diction reflects the language of the educated British classes of the time. Her use of elevated, formal vocabulary mirrors the speech of the Victorian gentry, while references to distinctly English elements, such as moorlands, parlors, hearths, and governesses, situate the reader firmly in the national landscape.

For example, the consistent use of terms like "propriety", "duty", and "virtue" reflects core British values of restraint and morality. Domestic vocabulary, such as "fireside", "nursery" and "drawing-room" reinforces the central role of home and family in English society.

The English countryside plays a central symbolic role in the novel. The detailed depictions of the moors and changing seasons are not only Romantic in style but also deeply national in content. The "bleak moors" and "grey hills" evoke the wild beauty of the British landscape and frame Jane's emotional journey.

Thornfield Hall and Lowood Institution are also described in ways that reflect English architecture and cultural ideals, one representing the decaying aristocracy and the other the strict discipline of Anglican education.

Brontë uses variation in speech to indicate social class and regional identity. Servants like Bessie and Hannah speak in Yorkshire-influenced dialects ("Eh, bless you, child!"), while Jane and Rochester use grammatically correct, elevated English. This contrast linguistically reinforces class divisions and adds authenticity to the national setting.

Furthermore, Jane's language is often laced with religious and moral references, a reflection of the Protestant ethic that shaped English national identity. Her conversations with characters like Helen Burns, Mr. Brocklehurst, and St. John Rivers are filled with biblical allusions and moral reasoning, portraying a nation steeped in Christian doctrine.

III. Linguistic means conveying the historical era

The novel's first-person narration is introspective and philosophically rich, consistent with Romantic and early Victorian literary traditions. Brontë uses long, complex sentences and parallel structures, reflective of 19th-century syntactic norms. The introspective tone, full of rhetorical questions, exclamations, and modal verbs, mirrors the emerging Victorian emphasis on individual conscience and inner moral struggle.

Example:

"I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will."

This sentence not only asserts personal freedom but also reflects a syntactic structure full of semicolons, clauses, and emphatic repetition, all characteristic of Victorian prose.

Language associated with duty, obedience, sacrifice, and self-restraint permeates the novel. Jane constantly evaluates her actions through a moral lens, and her language reflects the ethical standards of her time. Words such as "submit", "resist", "conscience", and "principle" signal the societal pressures faced by women in the 19th century.

When Jane leaves Rochester, despite her love for him, her justification is rooted in highly moralistic language:

"Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation... They have a worth – so I have always believed."

This language encapsulates the Victorian tension between emotion and moral propriety.

Brontë's language also reveals Victorian England's colonial mindset. Bertha Mason, Rochester's Creole wife, is consistently described using dehumanizing and exoticized language:

“clothed hyena”, “savage”, “lunatic.” The semantics of animality and madness reflect British fears of racial and colonial “others,” exposing a darker side of the era’s worldview.

Conclusion

Through rich and deliberate linguistic choices, Charlotte Brontë constructs a vivid national and historical picture in *Jane Eyre*. Her use of formal diction, symbolic imagery, dialectal variation, and morally charged language reflects the values and tensions of early Victorian England. The novel's stylistic devices from syntax to dialogue provide insight into class divisions, gender roles, religious thought, and colonial anxieties. Thus, *Jane Eyre* stands not only as a literary masterpiece but also as a linguistic artifact that mirrors the cultural and historical landscape of 19th-century Britain.

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