

On the imitation and subversion of the fairy tale archetype of Cinderella in *Jane Eyre*

Yanan WANG

Beijing Forestry University, Beijing 100083, China

Abstract: This paper discusses Charlotte Bronte's famous novel *Jane Eyre*'s imitation and subversion of the Cinderella fairy tale archetype from the perspective of archetypal criticism. Apart from imitating the plot structure, the author breaks the traditional model of the fairy tale in which the man acts as the redeemer and the woman is redeemed, and the relationship between the two sexes, in which the man takes the initiative and the woman is passive, to fully reflect her feminism advocacy and the idea of women's active pursuit of equal rights in a relationship. The correspondence between the surface structure of the novel and the archetypal fairy tale and the subversion of the deep structure create a great tension, which renders *Jane Eyre* a unique personality and a dazzling female image in the literature circle.

Key words: Charlotte Bronte; *Jane Eyre*; archetype; archetypal criticism

1 Archetype

Archetype refers to the original imagery, which is a typical recurring imagery. Archetypal criticism is a very important school of criticism which became popular in Western countries around the 1950s and 1960s. It is based on Fraser's myth theory, Jung Carl Gustav's "collective unconscious" theory and Canadian scholar Frye's archetypal criticism [1]. According to Jung Carl Gustav, archetypes are the manifestations of the collective unconscious that are not directly perceived in the long-term psychological accumulation of human beings, and therefore enter the creative process as the potential unconscious. But they in turn must be externalized, presenting themselves initially as "primitive imagery", manifesting in ancient times as mythological images, and then transformed into artistic images through art activated in the unconscious in different times. In other words, these primitive imageries are patterns and themes that have been constantly recurring throughout the following literature creation [2]. As a collective human unconscious, there is a continuity from ancient to modern times. The fairy tale of Cinderella is no exception, as a kind of household fairy tale archetype, it has become a narrative pattern and a collective unconscious of literary writers over the generations. Through adaptation and reconstruction, they have achieved certain literary effects.

To this day, *Jane Eyre* is still one of Charlotte Bronte's most famous and influential novels. Due to the influence of the current social and cultural context, especially feminism ideology, people in mounting numbers are captivated by the spirit of *Jane Eyre*, for her self-consciousness and defense of her own personality as well as her pursuit of freedom and equality. Just as Shakespeare puts it, "there are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people's eyes". Some scholars harbor the idea that *Jane Eyre* has become a world masterpiece because it successfully portrays an independent woman who dares to resist and fight for freedom and equality in her life under a male-dominated society. Take a closer look in terms of its

overall plot, the novel does not jump out of the fence of the Cinderella story. In essence, *Jane Eyre* is a variation of the Cinderella story in 19th century. Their basic structure is very similar, i.e., this novel equally ends with a happy ending by tying the knot. But *Jane Eyre* is not simply an imitation and repetition of the fairy tale archetype, on the contrast, it has made implicit breakthroughs in the previous story narrative. Instead of the conventional pattern of a hero saving a heroine plagued in trouble, the novel allows the heroine to play the role of a redeemer to save the hero, which changes the prevailing plot. Plus, in the relationship, the woman becomes the active pursuer of love, changing her passive state. In this way, the novel subverts the traditional model of the fairy tale archetype. In this process of imitation and subversion, Charlotte Bronte gives the novel a new connotation and meaning, and also further reflects her feminism ideology.

2 *Jane Eyre's* imitation of the Cinderella fairy tale archetype

The title of *Jane Eyre* indicates that Jane Eyre is the central character of the novel, and Charlotte Bronte successfully portrays her character through the first point of view in a self-referential tone. Using the familiar fairy tale of Cinderella as an archetype, it is easy to see the correspondence between the novel and the fairy tale in terms of their plot structure. Both of Cinderella and Jane Eyre suffer from bereavement since their childhood; both are loved by male elders and abused by female elders; both are bullied by their peers; both forgive their abusers after twists and turns in life, and both end up with marriage as a perfect conclusion to their respective growing process.

Specifically, the Cinderella in the fairy tale suffered a lot of abuse and mistreatment from her stepmother and her two sisters due to the early death of her mother and the remarriage of her father, and she was forced to toil and moil from morning to night, sleeping in front of the stove. Similarly, Jane Eyre became an orphan after losing both parents and lived in her aunt's house, suffering oppression and bullying from her aunt and her cousins. Basically, Cinderella and Jane Eyre live the same painful and hopeless life. At the end of the novel, the similar life trajectory of Jane Eyre and Cinderella once again confirms the influence of fairy tale archetype on Charlotte Bronte's literary creation. Fate allows Cinderella to meet her Prince Charming and be loved by him, and eventually they enter into a marriage and live happily ever after. Equally, Jane Eyre meets her Prince Charming - Mr. Rochester, who is attracted by Jane Eyre's personal charisma, and they both fall in love, and eventually conclude the story with a twisted but successful marriage. Rochester appears and rescues Jane Eyre from the difficulties of her life. To Jane Eyre, Rochester is her redemption in life. He is both Jane Eyre's master and the ideal person to provide her with a sense of stability and security. Jane Eyre, a "Cinderella" who has gone through a lot of hardships and obstacles, finally reaps her share of happiness in marriage. The correspondence in terms of plot structure between *Jane Eyre* and *Cinderella* is served as an explanation of Bronte's imitation of the Cinderella fair tale archetype.

3 *Jane Eyre's* subversion of the Cinderella fairy tale archetype

As a collective unconsciousness carried over from ancient times, the fairy tale archetype attracts Charlotte Bronte to imitate the fairy tale in the plot structure of her novel, carrying the formula of the Cinderella story from beginning to end. However, behind the archetype lies an implicit model of a woman who strives to challenge the convention in a patriarchal society. For some feminists, stories like Cinderella perpetuate the patriarchal condition of women by making the subordination of women [3]. This is unacceptable to feminists, and may be this is one of the motives of this novel's subversion of the previous fairy tale. Therefore, on the surface level, Charlotte Bronte does construct *Jane Eyre* through the story of Cinderella. Furthermore, the author breaks away from the traditional definition of women's role in a patriarchal society and redefines the female more boldly than her contemporaries, breaking away from the shackles of the existing Cinderella archetype.

As mentioned above, the influence of the fairy tale archetype on *Jane Eyre* is obvious, especially from the surface plot structure, and similar to Cinderella, Jane Eyre eventually makes a great leap from the "hearth" to the "king's palace". But

this romantic-sounding fairy tale shows a very limited pattern of female growth, because it runs counter to the idea of female independence and human equality. Thus, the novel mimics the fairy tale while subverting the prevailing hidden rules male-centered society. As is well known, in traditional fairy tales, the "Cinderella" heroines are often submissive characters who are able to endure humiliation and bullying mutely. They passively waiting for the turning point in their lives and meet their Prince Charming by accident and then get married. Eventually, they lead a happy life with the prince. In such fairy tales, there are a set of gender rules: women are subordinate to men, and they only rely on the redemption of men to obtain life happiness, or to achieve their life value. What is more, women are always in a weak and passive position, her function is used to reflect the strong and active nature of men. Although Jane Eyre has a similar fate to Cinderella, she has a resilient and unyielding spirit of resistance that Cinderella lacks. For example, at the very beginning of the novel, the author portrays a very rebellious woman for us. When Jane Eyre is insulted and humiliated by her cousin John Reed, she counters angrily, "Wicked and cruel boy! You are like a murderer - you are like a slave-driver - you are like the Roman emperors!" [4]. This is the first display of her rebellious spirit in the novel. Later, at Lowood School, she tells Helen Burns that "If people were always kind and obedient to those who are cruel and unjust, the wicked people would have it all their own way: they would never feel afraid, and so they would never alter, but would grow worse and worse. When we are struck at without a reason, we should strike back again very hard; I am sure we should - so hard as to teach the person who struck us never to do it again." The image of a very rebellious heroine has sprung to life. This statement clearly subverts the female image of the Cinderella fairy tale archetype. Even though Jane Eyre's life path was full of difficulties - ostracized by her aunt, bullied by her siblings, and experienced tough years at Lowood School - she always has an indelible spirit of resistance in her heart, and she would not easily give in to her fate, nor would she therefore put herself in a passive state and put her life in the hands of fate. She will continue to ride the stormy waters, which distinguishes her from Cinderella.

A key point in the Cinderella story is that the prince is the redeemer of Cinderella, and Cinderella is the redeemed, she is completely dependent on the prince and finally live a happy life and reap her happiness. Are they truly happy? Does Cinderellas tell us that she is happy? We have no idea of this question, for Cinderella even does not have a say to express her true feelings to us. What we know is that what the prince sees is Cinderella dressed in beautiful clothes and appearance with the help of magic, and it is the beautiful clothes under magic that turn an ordinary girl into a beauty [5]. Although the kindness, innocence and benevolence of Cinderella are highlighted in the story, what is shown to the prince has nothing to do with Cinderella's good virtues, but with her good appearance. Therefore, the love between the prince and the princess in *Cinderella* is too idealized, and it subconsciously tells us that beauty plays an important role for a girl who wants to live a princess-like life and have a happy marriage. In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte eschews the worldly measures of a woman's appearance and clothes. She says to her two sisters: "I am going to write a heroine for you to read. She and I are equally unimpressive and small in stature, yet she is going to be as interesting to readers as any heroine you have written." Jane Eyre is plain-looking, not well-built, and her costume is not half as beautiful as that worn by the ladies, but she is also brilliant, attracting Rochester's attention and love due to her distinctive temperament, courageous pursuit of love and her desire for equality between men and women. Charlotte Bronte is not keen on women's dressing compared to the Cinderella story. Jane Eyre does not make any effort to dress herself, except for "a sober black satin and pearl-grey silk", she does not have any magnificent dress. It was after her engagement to Rochester that Mr. Rochester had decided to buy her clothes and various brilliant jewelry to make her look pretty. Instead, she said, "Oh, sir! — never rain jewels! I don't like to hear them spoken of. Jewels for Jane Eyre sounds unnatural and strange: I would rather not have them."

Since the control of women in a patriarchal society has long been internalized over the years, a common adjective, a

common dress, and an agreed-upon everyday behavior might be an uncommon gender term. Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*: "Behind the excessive attention to dress is actually a masculine culture's age-old pursuit of the female image. For the patriarchal society has consistently demanded that the woman dresses up for her, not so that she can express her independent personality." "Thousands of years of cultural habits have led the woman herself to believe that her intrinsic value is influenced by the style and adornment of her clothes." So, when encountering a soul who had abandoned all external adornment and was noble, Rochester, fell deeply in love with the unattractive, poor and plain Jane Eyre. He said, "For women who please me only by their faces, I am the very devil when I find out they have neither souls nor hearts - when they open to me a perspective of flatness, triviality, and perhaps imbecility, coarseness, and ill-temper: but to the clear eye and eloquent tongue, to the soul made of fire, and the character that bends but does not break - at once supple and stable, tractable and consistent - I am ever tender and true." These words from the heart of Rochester truly conform to the heart of Jane Eyre, and thus, the spirit of the two people reached a high degree of unity. Jane Eyre's courage to pursue equal love and independent personality is her "crystal shoe" for happiness, this spiritual connotation makes her seemingly ordinary face glowing with a charm, but also shakes the world's prejudice against women's appearance, so that the world's eyes shift from a woman's appearance to their inner world. In general, Jane Eyre breaks away from the superficial thoughts of appearance, to achieve a transcendence over external beauty. In this way, under Charlotte Bronte's writing, Jane Eyre stands as a heroine who challenges the traditional Cinderella archetype and pursues her own equal love by following her heart. This is also Charlotte Bronte's recreation of the Cinderella character. Her portrayal of Jane Eyre shakes up the image of the "Cinderella" character, allowing the "Cinderella" to escape from the worldly shackles and bravely pursue the life and love she wants [6].

In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester is the typical Prince Charming image in the Cinderella story model. He is so mature and sophisticated and rich that even the noble, beautiful and arrogant Miss Blanche Ingram has to try every possible means to marry him. As the image of Cinderella, Jane Eyre is only his employed governess, lonely and innocent. When proposing, Rochester agrees with Jane Eyre's idea of equality and is attracted by her bravery and uniqueness, but as a typical chauvinist and the dominant figure in a male-dominated society, his subconscious sense of superiority brought by his own gender makes him not really regard Jane Eyre as an independent individual. He tries to manipulate Jane Eyre subconsciously, making Jane Eyre his personal property. Especially when Jane Eyre agrees to marry him, Rochester dotes on her, but also unconsciously assumes the posture of a master. He spent money like water, buying gorgeous clothes and brilliant jewelry for Jane Eyre. But all he does is make the sensitive, self-respecting Jane Eyre feel like a slave, "the more he bought me, the more my cheek burned with a sense of annoyance and degradation". Plus, she objects to Rochester calling herself an "angel" and hates that she is "dressed like a doll" by him. When she is jokingly called "Mrs. Rochester", Jane Eyre feels a kind of fear that she will lose herself. Jane Eyre's series of reactions fully demonstrate her self-awareness, which varies greatly from Cinderella.

Therefore, although Jane Eyre faced the same love as Cinderella, she was not willing to become just like what Cinderella does - waiting to be redeemed by the prince. As shown in the classic dialogue: "Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! - I have as much soul as you, - and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh; - it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal, - as we are!" In this part, Jane Eyre's sense of "equality between men and women" is shown to the fullest. She believes that every soul is equal in front of love, no matter men or women, rich or poor, beautiful or ugly, all have the right

to love and be loved. Jane Eyre never has the idea of relying on men for living, nor does she want to be an appendage of men. Such a thought is also reflected in the fact that she rejected her missionary cousin St. John's proposal. The reason is that she does not want to be a woman who lives dependent on a man and loses her own life goals.

The greatest shining point in Jane Eyre comes at the end of the novel. When Thornfield Hall burns to the ground and Rochester is left injured, disabled and penniless, Jane Eyre inherits the estate from her uncle, a twist of fate that shifts their financial status dramatically. When Jane Eyre heard about Rochester's unfortunate experiences, she immediately returned to him and they eventually got married and lived a happy life. At this point, Jane Eyre loses her identity as the redeemed and makes a great leap to become a redeemer like the prince in Cinderella. At this point, we can also see that there are two texts in Jane Eyre - the "context" and the "subtext". The context is "an archetypal fairy tale", which "exists as a paradigm for the common patterns of female growth, or more precisely, as a norm for the retardation and manipulation of women in fairy tales". The subtext is the "dream world", which constantly revises the appearance of the fairy tale [7].

The dream world evokes the consciousness of the protagonist and becomes a tool for her growth and awakening. Near the end of the novel, "the context merges with the subtext, which succeeds in showing the protagonists that life is not like a fairy tale and that they must write their own stories". Jane Eyre formally imitates and subverts fairy tales under the alternating effect of these two texts, thus creating an impressive female figure with personal charisma in the literature circle.

4 Conclusion

Angela Carter has a famous quote: "Every age creates or rewrites fairy tales according to the interests of that age". Writers "Dismantling archetypes, rewriting and reconstructing ecstatically based on the dismantled classics [8]." The Cinderella fairy tale, a household story, provides the plot structure for Charlotte Bronte's creation of *Jane Eyre*. More importantly, Charlotte Bronte has subverted the old redemption pattern of "man saves woman" and the "male active, female passive" in a relationship. The work's enduring appeal is mainly due to its reverberation and revival of the classic fairy tale, which further reflects *Jane Eyre's* implicit meaning and adds tension to the novel in its repetition of the traditional Cinderella story archetype. In this process of imitating and subverting fairy tale archetypes, Charlotte Bronte plays a unique symphony.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- [1] Atre S. 2011. The feminine as archetype. *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, 92: 151-193.
- [2] Liu JN. 2023. Power strife and rebellion in "Jane Eyre" from the perspective of field. *Academic Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences*, 6 (11). doi: 10.25236/AJHSS.2023.061101.
- [3] Clarke MM. 2000. Brontë's "Jane Eyre" and the Grimms' Cinderella. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*. 40(4): 695-710.
- [4] Charlotte-B. 1847. *Jane Eyre*. Wordsworth Editions Ltd.
- [5] Crowley K, John P. 2010. Feminist frauds on the fairies? Didacticism and liberation in recent retellings of "Cinderella". *Marvels & Tales*, 24(2): 297-313.
- [6] Westley FR, Carl F. 2018. Iconic images, symbols, and archetypes: their function in art and science. *Ecology and Society*, 23 (4).
- [7] Tatar M. 2010. Why fairy tales matter: the performative and the transformative. *Western Folklore*, 69 (1): 55-64.
- [8] Baker-Sperry L, Liz G. 2003. The pervasiveness and persistence of the feminine beauty ideal in children's fairy tales. *Gender and Society*, 17(5): 711-726.