

The struggle for woman's place and voice in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and George Sand's *Indiana*

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Abstract: The aim of my article is to uncover the deep semiotic relation existing between Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and George Sand's *Indiana* (1832), highlighting the proto-feminist elements that characterize both novels and drawing a comparative analysis of the two plots centered on the difficult journey of initiation of two young women physically and emotionally imprisoned by the laws of patriarchal society. Both novels follow a track of self-discovery through a progressive and circular development that shows below the surface plot, affirming social conventions, a submerged plot encoding rebellion. Through a semiotic analysis of the deep structure of the two novels my article intends to reveal a three-stage development of the protagonists, strictly connected to their progressive awakening to romantic and physical love. Moreover an analysis of the isotopic structure of the two texts will show how the dichotomy Nature vs. Culture undermines the two plots, from the micro to the macro levels of the texts. The conflict between Nature and Culture is at the origin of other thematic and figurative isotopies: love vs. marriage, physical vs. spiritual love, freedom vs. slavery, faith vs. religion, Creole vs. English, dark vs. light etc. These isotopies underline and support in both novels a distortion of the formalized conventions of love, highlighting the thematic conflict between woman's individual desire and the limits set to her within a patriarchal society.

Keywords: Jane Eyre, Indiana, Domestic Novels, Victorian Novels, Feminist Criticism

1. Introduction

Jane Eyre (1847) and *Indiana* (1832) are the first published novels of Charlotte Brontë and George Sand (pseudonym of Amandine Aurore Lucile Dupen) aged respectively 31 and 28.

At the time of publication both women were not novices in the field of novel writing. Charlotte Brontë had completed the *Tales of Angria and Gondal*, the novella *The Green Dwarf* and the manuscript of *The Professor*, works that will be published only posthumous. George Sand had written various articles for *Le Figaro* and, in collaboration with Jules Sandeau, a novel *Rose et Blanche* published under the pen name of Jules Sand. Despite these earlier works however it will be the publication of *Jane Eyre* and *Indiana* that will mark the official debut of the two women in the literary circles. Disguised under the masculine pen names of Currer Bell and George Sand, the two novelists met a sudden and controversial popularity. Both novels, in fact, though accompanied by an immediate success of public, aroused in their respective countries a general public anger caused by

the un-orthodox representation of the female protagonists, intimately resistant to the normative role assigned to women and therefore mining dangerously the conformist patriarchal construction of femininity to which women of the time had to abide. In my article I will try to uncover the similarities between the two novels by an analysis of their deep semiotic structures that show below the surface plot, affirming social conventions, a submerged plot encoding rebellion. Moreover an analysis of the isotopic structure of the two texts will show how the dichotomy Nature vs. Culture undermines the two plots, from the micro to the macro levels of the texts. The conflict between Nature and Culture is at the origin of other thematic and figurative isotopies: love vs. marriage, physical vs. spiritual love, freedom vs. slavery, faith vs. religion, Creole vs. English, dark vs. light etc. These isotopies underline and support in both novels a distortion of the formalized conventions of love, highlighting the thematic conflict between woman's individual desire and the limits set to her within a patriarchal society.

2. *Jane Eyre* and *Indiana*: Domestic Novels as Novels of Illicit Desire

Throughout the 17th and 18th century, and still with Jane Austen and Mme De Staël at the beginning of the 19th century, novels by both men and women writers had pursued the didactic scope of domesticating and feminizing their female audience by drawing a clear distinction between two typologies of women clearly at the antipodes: the angel vs. the devil, the virtuous vs. the sinner, the spiritual vs. the carnal, the virgin vs. the prostitute. In this construction of femininity, middle-class respectability was the *leit motif* accompanying all good heroines. Even if both men and women were equally constrained by gender roles it was however woman who paid the higher price. Her need for respectability, inspired by a Christian morality of purity and passivity, imprisoned her in "a kind of half-life within society because by definition respectability required her sexual repression" (Armstrong 1987, 165). In the course of the 19th century, as confirmed by well-recognized critics working within a feminist context, as Gilbert and Gubar (1979) and Nina Auerbach (1982), this female repressed sexuality starts to be represented by a double of the protagonist. Through this minor character - monstrous, mad or simply of lower social status - the unexpressed desire of all 'respectable' women is re-directed and is allowed to be expressed. However these doubles, as the 'lost women' of the previous generations, are destined to perish. They need to be hidden, their voices to be silenced and finally to be annihilated. In *Jane Eyre* and *Indiana* the repressed sexuality inscribed in the master-servant and unhappy marriage relations described in the two novels raises the question of the limits society imposes on women and on love conventions in general. Both novels are built on and develop from the sufferings endowed in unhappy marriages, imposed by the families and decided for the sake of economic advantage.

Rochester and Bertha Mason's marriage in *Jane Eyre* is arranged by Rochester's father and older brother that willingly conceal the madness of Bertha's mother "shut up in a lunatic asylum" (Brontë 352) to ensure the 30 pounds yearly dowry. In the same way Indiana is married, when just seventeen, to the much older Colonel Delmare, rich land owner, by her eccentric and violent father. It is interesting to remark that in both cases the marriage takes place outside Europe and in a more 'exotic' colonial context. Rochester's in a West Indian setting, Jamaica, a Spanish colony passed under British rule in 1655 and Indiana's in the Isle of Bourbon or Réunion as it is called nowadays, in the Indian Ocean, east of Madagascar, ruled by French. Moreover, in both cases the brides are Creoles. Bertha is probably of Spanish origins. It is not clear within the text how exactly tanned is her skin. Rochester compares her to Blanche Ingram: "tall, dark and majestic." Certainly a beautiful young girl described by Rochester's father as "the boast of Spanish town for her beauty". And as Rochester admits: "this was no lie" (352). The young Bertha is the daughter of a West Indian merchant and a local woman. The term 'Creole', originated in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies, was applied

by colonizers to the descendants of early European settlers born within the colonies. As affirmed by H. Adlay Murdoch: "Both France and Britain as European colonial powers came to represent the Creole as the unnamable third term, the impossible indeterminacy excluded by the colonial binary's *neither/nor* dyad" (Murdoch 2002, 1). The use of the term Creole, utilized within the colonizer/colonized context participated in the discursive construction of a hierarchical, race-based discourse of inequality that positioned Creole people into a lower racial and social status. This is well confirmed by Rochester in trying to justify the reasons of his marriage with Bertha: "Her family wished to secure me, because I was of a good race" (352). Being a European gives him a special value within the colonies while in Europe, as just a cadet brother, with no inheritance from his father, he has not many prospects of finding an eligible wife. During the short period before the marriage Rochester could have still refused the marriage but he is led to it by his senses and by the attention other men show towards the young Bertha: "All men in her circle seemed to admire her and envy me. I was dazzled, stimulated: my senses were excited; and being ignorant, raw, and inexperienced, I thought I loved her". Bertha is not just beautiful, she is sensual, and she employs on Rochester a physical, sexual attraction: "She flattered me, and lavishly displayed for my pleasure her charms and accomplishments" (352). The use of the adjective 'lavish' denotes profusion but can also be associated with excess. She displays an unrestrained sensuality that is just at the antipodes of the expected behavior of a Victorian lady, and this element of sensuality, transfiguring her in a sexual being, will be later denounced by Rochester as the main reason of her fall and madness:

Bertha Mason, the true daughter of an infamous mother, dragged me through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend a man bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste. (353)

Also in *Indiana*, the young protagonist is a Creole. However, differently from Bertha she is not characterized by a particularly dark tan. She still has brown hair but also a "frail and pallid charm" (Sand 60). Imprisoned in an unhappy marriage at only 19, she does not show any aspects of the vitality and sensuality that characterizes the young Bertha. She had been probably happier as a child in Bernica as the words expressed by her cousin, Ralph in the first chapter of the novel seem to uncover:

Put us in the wrong, my dear cousin, by recovering your health, your good spirits, your bloom, your animation of the old days; remember Ile Bourbon and that delightful retreat of ours, Bernica, and our happy childhood, and our friendship, which is as old as you are yourself. (Sand 58)

But her childhood was not just joy, as Indiana's immediate comment specifies: "I remember my father, too, said Indiana, dwelling sadly upon the words and placing her hand in Sir Ralph's" (58).

Indiana's real nature had been repressed first by the father

and then by the husband. She had not been allowed to bloom and she had become just a weak creature who “had all the superstitions of a nervous, sickly Creole” (59), as the narrator tells us. However also in *Indiana* we find the dualism between two representations of women as expressed in the opposition Jane Eyre/Bertha Mason. The double of the weaker and frailer Indiana is also of Creole origins. She is the chambermaid of the protagonist but also her friend since childhood. Her name is Noun and she is described as a beautiful and sensual girl:

Noun was Madame Delmare’s foster-sister; the two young women had been brought up together and loved each other dearly. Noun was tall and strong, glowing with health, active, alert, overflowing with ardent, passionate creole blood; and she far outshone with her resplendent beauty the frail and pallid charms of Madame Delmare; but the tenderness of their hearts and the strength of their attachment killed every feeling of feminine rivalry. (60)

Her passionate, ardent Creole blood recalls the young Bertha. Also in her case sensuality seems the main element characterizing the attraction she has on men. As the story develops, the young Noun meets, during a ball, a young aristocratic man, Raymon de Ramiere that, despite the class difference, starts courting her. The young Noun, mistakenly convinced by the passionate love declarations of her suitor, accepts his courtship and invites him secretly in her room, during the night. Following her senses Noun loses her purity and enters in the domain of the ‘unchaste’, where Bertha belongs. For her as for Berths, it will be this inability to control one's own passions and sexuality that will lead to madness and death. In fact Raymon, not differently from Rochester, will soon realize that his feeling was not love but just a physical attraction and the sensuality that had so much attracted him in the first place will be reduced to a major defect of the girl: “The courage with which she sacrificed her reputation to him, that courage which should have made him love her all the more, displeased Monsieur de Ramiere” (75). The young Raymon, as Rochester, will prefer a more serious and virginal type of woman. During a ball, in fact, he meets Indiana, and is taken by her reserved and shy personality. He starts developing a strong feeling not based this time on senses: “He had loved Noun with his senses; he loved madame Delmare with his heart.”(99). For Noun, abandoned by Raymon and pregnant with his baby, the only possibility left is suicide. She will drown herself in the river, without revealing to Indiana her secret. Though Raymon had offered her a sum of money to live on, away from him, Noun had not accepted, defying society and preferring to take away her life and that of her child. Through suicide the young woman shows her rejection of the half-life she is supposed to live and actively takes charges of her destiny. Until the end she shows to be master of her body. Though being a woman, belong to a lower social class and Creole, she does not submit, until the end, to someone else’s will, or better to the hypocrisy of society. In the same way, Bertha's fire destruction and suicide, though considered the act of a

madwoman secluded in the roof, represents the last desperate act of a woman whose active life has been denied. In both cases their gesture will have strong repercussions on the development of the plots and will allow their more conformist doubles, Jane Eyre and Indiana, to move forward from an idealized and passive love to an active and mature seizure of their destinies through a redefinition of their role as women and as lovers. Jane Eyre's eschewal from Thornfield will force her to look deeper within herself and reconstruct her feminine identity thorn between the moral dilemma of keeping her chastity by leaving Rochester and so denying her deeper desires or live with him, as his mistress, abandoning herself to her love and desires but paying the high price of becoming an outcast, losing the social acceptance and with it her own sense of belonging. Certainly her furtive escape from Rochester did not come as a surprise to her contemporary readers and to us. As any good heroine of her time she follows the precepts of conventional morality by choosing what is ‘expected’ from a young Victorian girl. However, the complexity of her choice are not easily masked or written off as was the general praxis for the chaste heroines of the novels that preceded her. Her reaction, in fact is double folded. If on one side, once recovered from the strain of her travel and settled as a school teacher, she thanks God’s providence for the guidance, rationally justifying her escape:

(...) is it better, I ask, to be a slave in a fool’s paradise at Marseilles— fevered with delusive bliss one hour— suffocating with the bitterest tears of remorse and shame the next — or to be a village school-mistress, free and honest, in a breezy mountain nook in the healthy heart of England? (414)

On the other side, in the following chapter, she reveals how in her dreams, once the social and moral constraints are loosened and her desires can be freely expressed, reappears the repressed sexuality denied in name of morality and religion:

I used to rush into strange dreams at night: dreams many-colored, agitated, full of the ideal, the stirring, the adventure, with agitating risk and romantic chance, I still again and again met Mr Rochester, always at some exciting crisis; and then the sense of being in his arms, hearing his voice, meeting his eyes, touching his hand and cheek, loving him, being loved by him (...) By nine o'clock the next morning I was punctually opening the school; tranquil, settled, prepared for the steady duties of the day. (423)

As affirmed by Nina Auerbach in her *The Woman and the Demon* (1982) figures of desire point to forms of feelings that the author could not unleash without violating what it meant then to be a woman. Expressions of female desire were certainly antithetical to Victorian ideals of femininity. Desire cannot be consciously accepted by the protagonist but it resurges in her dreams and witnesses the woman's schizophrenic stance towards her own sexuality. Once openly

expressed it would inexorably lead to exclusion, madness or death, as in Bertha's case, so it is hidden behind a curtain of daily 'tranquility'. But desire, in more general terms, "is the metonym of a discontent that motivates change" (Belsey 1994, 209). By making clear through dreams her desire, Jane Eyre eludes those laws and restrictions that control women and challenges the conventional representation of chaste heroines, sisters and daughters of Pamela, completely asexual but well trained in the pursue of the right spouse, through their wit and intelligence. Any weakness of the senses would be paid dearly, so the good heroines are always in full control of their bodies, showing their stronger morality in respect to men, their superiority in controlling their desires. When Rochester proposes her to become his mistress, though she loves him deeply and is tempted to stay with him, Jane's refusal is grounded on her stronger morality tied to religious and cultural principles. To be sane is to follow them. Their infringement is a clear sign of madness:

I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane, and not mad as I am now. Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation (...) if at my individual convenience I might break them, what would be their worth? (...) Preconceived opinions, foregone determinations, are all I have at this hour to stand by: there I plant my foot. (365)

This is the expectations by critics and public and as a Victorian heroine the culture of her specific historical moment imposes limits on the range of options available. As for previous heroines these preconceived opinions, these limits and rules imposed by society are internalized by Jane and transformed into natural elements belonging to her feminine nature. However Jane differs from the previous heroines as later on in the novel, the rigid and self-controlled protagonist gives place to a woman that is driven by desire and is well aware of the physical side of a man-woman relation. When rejecting the marriage proposal of St. John she is well conscious of the demands her future husband will have on her and this is one of the reasons stopping her from accepting him:

Can I receive from him the bridal ring, endure all the forms of love (which I doubt not he would scrupulously observe) and I know that the spirit was quite absent? Can I bear the consciousness that every endearment he bestows is a sacrifice made on principle? No: Such martyrdom would be monstrous. I will never undergo it. As his sister, I might accompany him - not as his wife: I will tell him so. (467)

Jane's love for Rochester and her lack of love for St. John is driven by her senses and desires more than from her rational mind or principles. As Elisabeth Sabiston (2008) reminds us, in Denis de Rougemont's terms Rochester would represent *Eros*, the passionate love, whereas St. John *Agape*, or marriage based on spiritual sharing. Passion and desire are certainly paramount in Jane's decisions as are her senses. The

mysterious cry of Rochester that convinces her to look for him, her return to a man that she knows is already married is not driven by her principles or a rational thought but by her intuitions and her senses.

In the same way, in *Indiana*, the protagonist, after accepting the courting of Raymon, finds herself divided between her duty as a wife, even as unhappily married, and the desire to escape to her lover. Her love is unconditional and absolute; however she will not become the mistress of Raymon. Some fortuitous coincidences and the discovery of Raymon's relation with Noun will deter Indiana from following her senses. In Marta Wilkinson's words "She will prefer to remain physically faithful to her husband, accept to follow him back to Ile Bourbon, prisoner of an unhappy marriage, rather than suffer the scorn of social criticism" (2008, 31). The hypocritical morality of her time will bend her for a while but will not suppress her nature and desire. After a gradual but steady transformation, driven by her passion for Raymon, she will break the chains that keep her subjugated and will refuse the husband authority on her will and desires:

I know that I am the slave and you the master. The laws of this country make you my master. You can bind my body, tie my hands, govern my acts. You have the right of the stronger, and society confirms you in it; but you cannot command my will, monsieur; God alone can bend it and subdue it. Try to find a law, a dungeon, an instrument of torture that gives you any hold on it! You might as well try to handle the air and grasp space. (232)

She will return to Raymon in France in a dangerous sea journey. As Jane after her night escape from Thornfield, Indiana will find herself in Paris in the poverty and loneliness of a vagabond, excluded from society. Her experience of complete poverty and hunger will lead her to a symbolic death and to a re-born. The new Indiana, rescued by her cousin Ralph as Jane, waking up in the house of St. John Rivers at Marsh End, is a new woman. She has the possibility to break away from the past and decide with new freedom for her destiny. While in Jane's case the new chance is given by the unexpected heredity, for Indiana it is the news of her husband's death. Now Indiana is free but she has also discovered that Raymon had married another woman and abandoned her. In the last part of the book both Jane and Indiana will find a new life away from society and from its influence. Jane in the isolated cottage of Ferndean and Indiana in the virgin forest of Reunion. Both women will take charge of their new destiny by abandoning the conventional passivity inscribed within man-woman relation and will fund a new one based on equality with their partner. Jane by marrying the new Rochester weakened by its physical and spiritual wounds and Indiana by leaving France and withdrawing from society, helping the escapee slaves in the forest and sharing her life with her cousin Ralph, whose love revelation has given her a new purpose in life.

3. Conclusion

In *Jane Eyre* and *Indiana* is described the difficult journey of initiation of two young women physically and emotionally imprisoned by the laws of patriarchal society. Both novels follow a track of self-discovery through a progressive and circular development that shows below the surface plot, affirming social conventions, a submerged plot encoding rebellion. In both novels the plot starts from a situation of suffering, proceeds with the heroine falling in love, a false love led by passions, and concludes with the failure of these relations based on senses and a new relation issued on new grounds, where the woman has a new place and a new voice. Thematic and figurative isotopic oppositions are at the basis of the two plots: love vs. marriage, physical vs. spiritual love, freedom vs. slavery, faith vs. religion, Creole vs. English, dark vs. light etc. These isotopies underline and support in both novels a distortion of the formalized conventions of love, highlighting the thematic conflict between woman's individual desire and the limits set to her within a patriarchal society. Although being love stories and terminating with a happy ending both novels draw a crude portrait of the physical and moral sufferings of young women of the time, whose nature is bent by the hypocrisy of religion and false morality that deny their sexuality but present love as the only avenue of escape. Heroines are expected to show a continuous control of their bodies and senses. If they show their deepest passions the consequences are death and madness. Bertha and Noun exemplify the destiny of women indulging in their desires and losing as a consequence their social respectability. *Jane Eyre* and *Indiana*, instead, appear to be caught in the middle, between following the respectability rules imposed by Culture on one side while on the other recognize the need of women, as human being, to take action in their lives, following Nature.

Nature is the place where they look for refuge after their escape. However Nature alone does not nourish or protect them. Once alone within Nature, with no name or recognition by society they risk to die of cold and hunger. Only the return within Culture spares them from death. Nature is not the loving mother they expected but more of an ungenerous stepmother. It is their return within society that saves their lives and shows once more that within the conventional order of society there is no possibility of a life led by Nature but only by abiding to Culture. Within the two texts to Nature belongs the illicit desire, to Culture the repression of it. Nature represents what cannot be expressed, what must be hidden. Culture, on the other hand, is the *locus* of containment and discipline. The sexual discourse originally located within the individual sphere incorporates a discourse of power that belongs to the public realm. This discourse of power cannot be fought by woman alone without inexorably leading to her death. The schizophrenic stance between desire and respectability, at the center of both novels, represented schematically by the opposition of Nature vs. Culture, is resolved in fact with the withdrawal of the heroines from society and the creation of a new order within Nature where

man and woman are united in a new kind of relation of equality that do not follow the principles set by Culture. The internalized rules defend the good heroine from death but do not allow the full expression of her nature and desires. Both novels do not envisage the possibility for women of a full expression nor conceive of a political reform of laws. Nevertheless their illicit desire provides an ideal to strive for and throw the seeds of a personal and relational transformation towards a more egalitarian relation between men and women. This transformation starts when the woman decides she will not be a victim anymore and by following her deeper desires she abandons society and projects herself in a new utopic world governed by the rules of nature. The happy ending of both novels seems to reconduct rashly the plots within the idealistic and romantic convention of domestic novels and contrasts with the previous proto-feminist instances. However in both novels it is possible to glimpse a new path within the domestic novels whose aim is the unveiling of dominations. By idealizing a utopian space where men and women can reconstruct their relation as equals the novel deconstructs the categorization "woman-man" as funded in Nature and shows this relation as social and historical. In this perspective the relation of domination can be contested and reversed by the subjects involved within this relation. For women this implies breaking the symbolic order that through a psychoanalytic and social discourse prepares them from childhood to live with and accept their own oppression. However, breaking this order is not solely tied to individual willingness. As affirmed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1998) the social identity of man and woman is the product of a social work of nomination and inculcation within the biological nature and becomes "habitus" i.e. embodied social law. Following his thesis a symbolic revolution cannot take place by a simple conversion of conscience or will. The foundation of the symbolic violence does not rest in the mystified consciences that we need to enlighten but in "dispositions" that conform to the structures of dominations whose products are the dispositions themselves. For the French sociologist we cannot expect a breaking up of the relation of complicity that the victims of the symbolic domination share with the dominants unless we assist to a radical transformation of the social conditions which produce the "dispositions" that lead the dominated to assume the same perspective of the dominants. A relation of domination that works through the complicity of the "dispositions" depends profoundly for its perpetuation or its transformation on the perpetuation or on the transformation of the structures (*habitudines*) of which these dispositions are the products. So dispositions (*habitus*) are inseparable from the structures (*habitudines*) that produce and re-produce them, both for men and women. Only by transforming the structures, dispositions can be modified and with it a change to the symbolic order can be attempted (Bourdieu 1998). One way of transforming the structures is to avoid the influence of the institutions charged of ensuring the perpetuation of their symbolic role: the family, the Church, the State. In *Jane Eyre* and *Indiana*, the two protagonists take this last step by deciding, as the conclusive act of their self-assertion, to consciously confine themselves

outside of Culture, within the domain of Nature. Only without the influence of the family, the Church, the State it is possible for them to imagine a new life, re-create new "dispositions" and a new symbolic order. However this new order would not be possible without the emergence of a new companion, a modified figure of male character with new characteristics in respect to the patriarchal figures encountered before. Both Jane and Indiana in fact end their relation with authoritarian and virile male figures, as the first Rochester and St. John (for Jane) and Colonel Delmar and Raymon (for Indiana), and choose more docile and feminine male figures as represented by the half-blinded Rochester and the phlegmatic cousin Ralph. The lessened signs of virility in the two men are a clear way of denying them the power that characterizes the dominant and, by destabilizing the established order, subvert the mechanisms of symbolic taxonomy. Grounded on new basis and freed from the old structures both novels end with the utopist vision of a new couple defined in more equitable terms where the woman is not anymore solely the 'object' of exchange but becomes a 'subject' that participates in the creation of a new order.

The revolutionary stance of the two novels is certainly in their open critic of the moral hypocrisy of their time but their vigor and modernity is in the proposal of this alternative symbolic order that challenges the dichotomy Nature/Culture, object/subject, passivity/activity, woman/man. By cutting their relation with society the protagonists eschew the somatization of the objective structures of domination, the naturalization of its constructed rules and refuse to be solely the object within the founding symbolic exchange constituted by the marriage institution. Their active role next to their partners allows them to challenge the principles of division between man and women and gives them a new vision and new potentials in the world. Jane Eyre and Indiana give voice to a more complex and self-aware new heroine that reclaims an active place next to her spouse and looks for a new role within a new form of society that she is willing to re-construct according to new rules she is ready to set.

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