

Analysis of Jane Eyre's Choice-making at Her Critical Lifetime Moments in "Jane Eyre" from the Perspective of Existentialism

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Abstract

The present paper analyzes Jane Eyre's choice-making at her critical lifetime moments in Charlotte Bronte's "Jane Eyre" from the perspective of existentialism. Through the analysis, readers can get that by constantly making choices for herself and on her own at her critical lifetime moments in four different settings, the protagonist Jane Eyre creates her own "essence" of rebelliousness, free will of choice-making, self-esteem and choice of love.

Keywords

choice-making, Jane Eyre, "Jane Eyre", existentialism, essence.

1. Introduction

Existentialism is a philosophy theory that people are free agents who have control over their choices and actions.[1] That is, people can endow themselves with value and meaning for their lives by constantly making their own choices out of their free will despite the absurd and meaningless world they live in. Some of the core ideas of existentialism are as follows. 1. Existence precedes essence. 2. Human existence is accidental and absurd. 3. Existence is not predetermined. Rather, it is created by a person himself by constantly making choices. 4. Humans enjoy absolute freedom, which is shown in their choices and actions.[2] The protagonist Jane Eyre is such a typical figure following the philosophy of existentialism at her critical lifetime moments in difficult situations. By making the very choices for herself on her own, Jane Eyre fearlessly fights against the dark side of the society and gains invaluable merits such as self-esteem, independence, unyielding spirits as a human being in a hell-like society. The present paper tries to analyze the main character Jane's choice-making in her critical moments in life as part of her fight against the "oppressors" or as her pursuit of ideals.

2. Body

2.1. Jane's Choice-making of Fighting Back at Gateshead

When Jane is only ten years old, her parents dies and she must live in her uncle's home. After the death of her uncle, Jane is left completely in the hands of her aunt-in-law and her cousins. Jane is often abused and bullied both physically and mentally by her aunt and the three Reed children. According to existentialism, that is cruel reality Jane must face, a desperate reality that Jane is suffering along the way. At first, Jane passively endures all the sufferings. However, bullied by her tall and robust cousin John so many times, Jane finally decides to fiercely fight back. Then Jane is locked in a red room where her uncle dies years ago. Such horrible life is by no means meaningful for Jane, but she chooses to reshape herself and changes her thoughts and actions so that a possible wonderful life may await her in the future. Therefore, Jane, who is a representation of the human beings under the existentialism philosophy, stops keeping silent by making choices to fight back without considering the possible consequences, which has actually opened a new chapter for her---Jane is sent to a charity institution by her aunt.

2.2. Jane's Choice-making of Leaving Lowood Institution and Rejecting Helen's Values

Lowood institution is a charity school in which Jane is tortured both physically and mentally. The hypocritical Mr. Brocklehurst who runs the school humiliates Jane publicly in the presence of all the other kids. But instead of thinking about giving up on herself, Jane works very hard in her studies and strives to improve her comprehensive abilities in an all-round manner. After six years of hard work, Jane successfully becomes a qualified teacher at the school, which is a major accomplishment for a woman with poor family background at that time. We can say that Jane takes charge of her own future in a seemingly unpromising reality. Getting fed up with the life in Lowood school, Jane makes her choice of seeing a little more of the world---finding a job as a governess. Jane's fate is steadily changed by the choices she has made one after another.

At Lowood, Jane makes friends with Helen Burns. Helen, a most benevolent lady, embraces the belief of enduring all the injustice she is suffering, as she believes "life is too short, should not be used to bear grudges".[3] Jane, a rebellious girl in nature, is in the depth of her heart showing her objection to Helen's beliefs. When Mr. Brocklehurst wants to punish Helen, Helen volunteers to hand him the whip. But Jane says to Helen that she would break the whip off if she were Helen. After Helen dies of consumption in her arms, Jane gets devastated and becomes more independent, strong-willed and powerful. Jane's mentality development shows that human beings can freely choose to be rebellious and strong-will or obedient and tolerant despite the fact that they cannot change the extreme situations.

2.3. Jane's Choice-making of Leaving Mr Rochester at Thornfield

Mr Rochester, the owner of Thornfield, appears to be always in mixed emotions as if he is suffering a sin committed in the past. By talking and comforting Mr Rochester, Jane, in whom Mr Rochester finds mental peace and emotional balance, manages to give him the very emotional support he needs. And by further communicating with Mr Rochester, Jane falls in love with her master. Jane keeps her love for Mr Rochester a secret as she is fully aware of their vastly differently social statuses. What Jane does not know is that Mr. Rochester also falls in love with her. Mr Rochester tests Jane by lying to her that he will soon marry Blanche Ingram. Jane pours out her true inner feelings, and Mr Rochester confesses that it is Jane who he loves and he is ready to marry her. Jane is quite amazed but happily accepts the proposal. However, something unexpected happens at the wedding ceremony. A London lawyer appears and declares that the marriage is illegal because Mr Rochester has already had a wife.

Again, Jane encounters a new harsh reality, a reality characterized by existentialism that Jane is not able to predict or take charge of. For Jane, to marry a married man or to give up the happy life with her beloved is a serious question. Of course, Jane cannot change the situation as things have already occurred, but she does have the freedom to choose her own destiny that can define herself as a human being. Mr Rochester has offered to elope with Jane overseas, but Jane refuses to be her mistress and makes the choice of leaving alone the next day at dawn. Jane gives up the materially comfortable life and invaluable love and chooses to leave. Under this circumstance, Jane's "existence" is absurd---to be married to a married man. But she has the absolute freedom to make her own choices. And by choosing to leave Mr Rochester, Jane creates her own "essence". Jane becomes a woman deserving respect through her choices and actions. She is also supposed to be responsible for her own choices. That is, a miserable life for survival is to arrive for her.

2.4. Jane's Choice-making of Leaving St. John at Moor House and Returning to Mr Rochester

St. John is an ambitious clergyman who plans to go to India as a missionary. St. John confesses to Jane that he would like to marry her because he thinks Jane is fit for the role of his assistant

so that she can work for him, not out of love. Jane refuses to be St. John's wife but almost promises to go with him as his sister. In the dilemma, Jane seems to have heard Mr Rochester's calling and she immediately leaves and returns to join Mr Rochester. Upon arrival, Jane finds that Thornfield has turned into ruins and Mr Rochester has been injured, with his eyes blind and one hand missing.

Jane has the chance to go with St. John and live a different life by choosing a different path. But she chooses love and her heart's calling and finally returns to her love. Jane's encounter with Mary, Diana and St. John Rivers is quite "accidental". When St. John proposes, Jane undoubtedly realizes the importance of making choices. She chooses not to marry St. John, and takes the responsibility of such a choice. By choosing not to marry St. John, Jane defines herself as person who is in pursuit of mutual love in a marriage rather than secular concerns. In the end, Mr Rochester's missing hand and blindness make a most cruel reality for Jane. Jane must make a choice of whether to accept Mr Rochester's disabilities or to abandon him. By embracing Mr Rochester's disabilities, Jane creates her essence as a compassionate person.

3. Conclusion

Based on existentialism philosophy, the present paper analyzes Jane Eyre's choices made at her critical life moments in four different settings in the novel "Jane Eyre". Jane cannot decide her "existence" as a human being in different situations, but she does have the absolute freedom to make her own choices, acts out based on the choices and takes responsibility for the choices she has made. By making her own choices in the four critical situations, Jane can create her "essence" of rebelliousness, free will of making choices, self-esteem and love respectively as a human being. At Gateshead, Jane makes the choice of not keeping silent anymore and fighting fiercely back against her cousin John. At Lowood, Jane makes the choice of leaving the charity school after two years of teaching. At Thornfield, Jane makes the choice of leaving her beloved husband-to-be Mr Rochester. At Moor House, Jane makes the choice of returning to Mr Rochester and accepting him who has come down in the world. By analyzing the classic "Jane Eyre" from the perspective of existentialism, readers can better comprehend the novel and the term existentialism as well.

References

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