

# Analysis on Women Education in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Based on Jane Eyre and Other Famous English Literature Written by Women Authors

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## ABSTRACT

Education is never a topic too outdated to talk about, specifically women's education. In the 18th and 19th century, the education women received in England can be reflected through plenty of angles. One of them is the female characters in novels written by female British authors. From this particular perspective, it is going to be interesting to see how education affected women's life and attitude in the 18th and 19th century England.

**Keywords:** *Boarding school, Family education, Governess*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is known that women were believed better not to be educated in the same way as a man since the beginning of the first school. Their education was focused on housework and languages or artistic talents such as dancing and drawing. Some of the educators even allow their female students not knowing how to write. This shows that the status of women was always lower than that of men in society. But as the industrialization of England, women education starts to progress slowly. Until the publishing of "Elementary Education Act 1870", the equality of education was then given to both genders. From 18<sup>th</sup> century to 19<sup>th</sup> century, which is the turning point for women education, the books are written by famous women authors and their life in the 18-19 century England might give us an answer on how this transition has been done.

There are a few factors that influence the population of women that achieves education.

### 1.1. Political influences

The hierarchy was obvious in England in the 18th and 19th century. Even though there are people promoting education, but most aristocrats were scared that knowledge will weaken their control on the lower-class people and therefore, discourage the opening of education towards all social levels.

However, even though such perception exists among the aristocrats, as the increase in education levels did enhance the industrialization of England for both economy and military sciences, they did not manage to stop the education from developing.

Speaking of the differences between the education men and women receives, although men have a higher percent of educational rate than women, the decreasing rate of non-education of women was faster than men. The non-

educational population of women decreased from 78% to no more than 10%.

### 1.2. Economy

In the book "Jane Eyre", we can see that the main character Jane's best friend Helen Burns died at a young age. we can easily refer the plot to author Charlotte Brontë herself as her sister was also died after getting sick in school. In that particular period, the death rate of children was very high.

In fact, until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, only half of the newborns could make it to adulthood. But education has never been cheap. This just made the middle class and even some of the upper-class families think twice before letting all children attend a school or be educated. As if the child who gets education passed away at a young age, not only they lost a child but all the investment they put into education as well.

Since education received by children is decided by the family back then. As for the upper-class families, the boys were usually raised by governess when they were young, then sent to a public school when they were older. The girls mostly stayed at home, the education they received is all about the skills they are going to need after they got married.

But in the mid-low to lower class families, the situation is different. Some of the families will treat education as a way to turn things around. They hope the child who gets an education will bring improvements to the family in both economic and social levels.

Undeniably, there were still places for middle and lower class' daughter to go to school. If we look through the book "Jane Eyre", we can see the real-life experiences of the authors being reflected in their book.

## 2. WAYS OF GETTING EDUCATED

It's interesting to see how a woman could receive education from the book written by a woman author. Often,

this represents the most direct feeling from In Jane Eyre, Charlotte combines two different ways for a woman to get an education from the middle and lower classes. There are mainly two ways for a woman to be educated.

### **2.1. Boarding Schools**

Jane Eyre was sent to Lowood boarding school. However, the conditions and treatment of the boarding school weren't as what we expect to see nowadays.

In 1824, Charlotte attended the Clergy Daughters' School in Lancashire. The terrible food, harsh environment and discipline were mostly reflected in Lowood Institution where Jane Eyre went to school. Charlotte's family is not rich. And the fact that her mother and eldest sister died also leads to an incomplete childhood. The family moved to Haworth amid the Yorkshire, where they lived with their aunt.

The most entertaining activity they would do when they were at home or on the desolate moors is telling tales and inventing imaginative games. The famous novel *Wuthering Heights* by her sister Emily Bronte might be created throughout this game.

The childhood of Charlotte was also reflected on Jane Eyre's childhood, whose parents also died and lived with her aunt. However, Jane's childhood and the boarding school she went all shows reflection on Charlotte's own childhood.

From both Charlotte and Jane's childhood, the qualities of boarding schools in the 18th and 19th century in England are obvious. Although it provided education for women the environment and faculties are not at all pleasing. Also, since Charlotte and Jane both live in a middle-class family, boarding schools are one of the best options for them. As the school fees are cheaper, also, children will be living in the school where they would not interfere with the work of their parents.

### **2.2. Family Education (Governess)**

Which turned into one of the few work options for women. As for our character Jane, she became a governess at Thornfield. From the book, we can see that Jane uses a flexible teaching method to teach her student, Adela.

"I felt it would be injudicious to confine her too much at first; so, when I had talked to her a great deal, and got her to learn a little, and when the morning had advanced to noon, I allowed her to return to her nurse"

Jane never pushed Adela into learning anything even though she herself was not treated that way in the boarding school. We can easily infer that Charlotte reflected her own wish on a good education for women on how Jane teaches Adela.

Although Mr. Rochester is wealthy and is in the upper level in society, due to Jane Eyre's flexible teaching method and Adela's modesty, it should be considered as a success in the early education for women in the 19th

century England. Jane never forced Adela in to learning anything, even though in her own youth she isn't treated the same way. Jane uses props and models to teach Adela, which is a very modern method to use. According to Barlie Nancy, an award winning teacher, five of the best teaching method of the year is — student centered discussions, making connections, increased autonomy, building relationships, and a focus on literacy. Among them, Jane uses wooden butterflies as to build a relationship to the word caterpillar, and focuses on reading pleasant novels and short stories with Adela. Thus, it is possible to infer that Charlotte injects her own wish on a good education for women on how Jane teaches Adela.

Unfortunately, however, not all family education was as successful as the ones Jane provided for Adela. There were still plenty failures, perhaps even more than the successful ones.

Miss Bingley was one of the examples in *Pride and Prejudice*. "At length, quite exhausted by the attempt to be amused with her own book, which she had only chosen because it was the second volume of his, she gave a great yawn and said, 'How pleasant it is to spend an evening in this way! I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading!'" In this scene where she and Elizabeth Bennet are sitting in one room with Darcy, the contrast between herself and Elizabeth are extremely obvious. As an upper class family's daughter, Miss Bingley received family education. However, while Elizabeth is captivated by the book she is reading, Miss Bingley's attentions are completely on Mr. Darcy, who is focusing on the letters he is writing. It is possible to speculate that although women receive education, their behaviors might not look as if they have received any.

Another more clarified example in *Jane Eyre* is with Miss Ingram, who is completely spoiled from the so-called family education for upper class women in the 18th century England. There is a scene when Miss Ingram, Jane and Mr. Rochester sit in one room, and Miss Ingram gives a scornful look at Jane. She then asks Mr. Rochester why Adela doesn't go to school. Mr. Rochester answered that Adela has a governess. Without a second thought, Miss Ingram answered:

"Poor child. I had about half a dozen in my day, all detestable monsters."

Miss Ingram's mother says:

"Mr. Rochester, beware of the governess."

Miss Ingram adds quickly:

"Mama thinks they are all hysterics."

She knows that Jane Eyre is in sight, but she still expresses her point of view, as if deliberately looking down upon the governess. Also, Miss Ingram expresses all her unsatisfactory of having a governess, which shows that the daughters of aristocrats aren't as perfect as one imagines they are.

Then, Miss Ingram says:

"Let's stop talking about this boring subject, let's talk about men."

From this conversation, it is explicit how most governesses are treated and seen in the past. Although Miss Ingram is very dislikable in her own character, it irrefutably shows

that the governesses are not teaching in an appropriate method. If all of the governesses teach in the same way as Jane does, the result of the women who received such education might behave differently.

### **3. OVERALL QUALITY OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION**

By differentiating the education for women into the ones upper class received and the ones middle or lower class received, it is not hard to see, that although there are several ways for women to have education, it is not enough. The quality is not very optimistic. For the upper classes, most of their daughters already get into the habit of the monetary life, including parties, jewelries, and the experiences only upper classes have the possibility to attend. In addition to the look down upon of governess this career, the daughters in upper class families wouldn't regard themselves as needing someone who is poor to teach them anything. For the middle and lower class families, daughters there were either ordered to stay at home for work, earning more money for the family or just doing the chores that a housewife would do; or were sent to the boarding schools that, as the one shown in *Jane Eyre*, treated girls badly instead of providing them the required education.

### **4. CONCLUSION**

In a nutshell, even though information from books is very limited, but we believe every part of it is a reflection of the actual world at that time. From the words of the women authors, we can see that women education in the 18th and 19th century were having many challenges. The environment of schools for middle to lower class female students, the way upper-class families look at the governess. As society slowly develops, more and more women fight for their own rights, until the publishing of "Elementary Education Act 1870" which then gives the education rights equally to both genders. It is a fact that although there is a tendency of women education increasing, the quality, efficiency and effectiveness lacks. But we also need to admit that even until today, we still face problems in women education around the world. There is still a long way to go in women education.

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