LINGUISTIC AND STYLISTIC REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN JANE EYRE AND VANITY FAIR: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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ANNOTATION

This article analyses the linguistic and stylistic mechanisms through which Charlotte Brontë and William Makepeace Thackeray construct their heroines in two landmark 1847–1848 Victorian novels. Examining figurative language, free indirect discourse, structural irony, and dominant imagery, the study demonstrates that divergent formal choices encode ideologically incompatible models of Victorian femininity.

Keywords: figurative language, free indirect discourse, Gothic imagery, irony, narrative voice, Victorian femininity, stylistics, feminist literary criticism, Charlotte Brontë, William Makepeace Thackeray.

INTRODUCTION

Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1847–1848) were published in the same literary season yet encode strikingly different models of Victorian femininity. The most revealing contrast between them lies not in their plots or explicit themes, but in their formal and linguistic architecture: the figurative choices, narrative structures, imagery systems, and rhetorical devices through which each heroine is constituted as a subject.

As Simpson (2004) argues, the stylistics of a literary text cannot be separated from its ideological content: every formal choice—narrative point of view, free indirect discourse, irony, imagery—encodes a stance toward the world being depicted (p. 3). Armstrong (1987) has demonstrated that the Victorian novel was one of the primary cultural instruments through which gendered subjectivities were produced; formal choices governing how female characters are represented are therefore also political choices about what kinds of female selfhood are legitimate, sympathetic, or dangerous.

This article examines those formal choices across three interrelated domains: (1) the figurative language employed in or associated with each heroine’s speech and interiority; (2) the deployment of free indirect discourse (FID) and its implications for the construction of female subjectivity; and (3) the dominant imagery systems and ironic structures that frame each heroine’s social existence. The analysis draws on the theoretical frameworks of Bakhtin (1981), Fludernik (1993), Genette (1980), Booth (1961), Gilbert and Gubar (1979), and Showalter (1977).

MAIN BODY

Figurative Language as Ideological Practice

Bakhtin (1981) argues that dialogue is never merely communicative—it is ideologically charged, encoding the speaker's social position, power relations, and inner subjectivity. In the Victorian novel, where women's public speech was constrained by rigid codes of femininity, the figurative dimensions of female characters' language become especially revealing sites of meaning. As Leech and Short (2007) observe, "the way characters speak is as important as what they say" (p. 135).

Jane Eyre's speech is distinguished by metaphorical expression that frames her inner moral and emotional life in terms of natural, elemental, and spatial imagery. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) identify in *Jane Eyre* a persistent symbolic language of entrapment and liberation that surfaces most powerfully in Jane's spoken words. The most celebrated instance occurs in her declaration to Rochester: "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will" (Brontë, 1847/2006, p. 284). The negation of the bird-and-net metaphor is rhetorically significant: Jane does not merely claim freedom but dismantles the figurative framework of capture and domestication that Victorian discourse routinely applied to women. Poovey (1988) notes that the metaphorical domestication of women was a pervasive ideological structure in Victorian culture, one that Brontë's Jane consciously inverts through figurative counter-assertion.

The antithetical structure of Jane's farewell declaration— "The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself" (Brontë, 1847/2006, p. 356)—performs moral resilience through syntactic escalation. Ingham (1996) argues that such rhetorical patterns in Brontë's female dialogue enact a form of linguistic self-constitution: Jane does not merely describe her selfhood but produces it through the act of speaking. Eagleton (1975) similarly observes that Jane's speech consistently works to detach social visibility from moral worth through figurative and rhetorical patterning.

Becky Sharp's figurative language operates on an altogether different principle. Where Jane's speech is transparently expressive, Becky's is defined by calculated opacity. Bakhtin's (1981) concept of the double-voiced word—utterances that simultaneously serve an overt communicative function and a covert, subversive one—is especially applicable to Becky's mode of expression. Her most celebrated remark encapsulates this ironic register: "I think I could be a good woman if I had five thousand a year" (Thackeray, 1848/2003, p. 468). The conditional structure ironises Victorian morality itself, reducing virtue to a function of income. As Heyns (1994) observes, Becky's irony is a survival mechanism: having been denied the material preconditions of "respectable" femininity, she exposes those preconditions through the very idiom of respectability.

Shires (1992) notes that this stylistic distinction encodes a contrast between two models of female interiority: one that assumes depth, sincerity, and spiritual substance (Jane), and one that performs interiority strategically while concealing or perhaps lacking it altogether (Becky). Poovey (1988) argues this reflects the Victorian novel's deep ambivalence about female agency: it can be sanctioned when spiritualized but remains troubling when nakedly strategic.

Free Indirect Discourse and the Construction of Female Subjectivity

Free indirect discourse—the technique by which a narrator renders a character's thoughts in third person while retaining the character's idiomatic and emotional register—is among the most powerful stylistic instruments in the Victorian

novel. As Fludernik (1993) argues, FID is fundamentally a technique of intimacy: it draws the reader inside a character's consciousness without the mediating frame of "she thought" or "she said." The manner in which FID is deployed in relation to each heroine is strikingly different in the two novels.

In *Jane Eyre*, the question of FID is complicated by the novel's first-person retrospective narration. Because Jane herself is the narrator, the conventional distance between narrator and character collapses entirely. This structural choice is ideologically significant. By giving Jane full control of her own narrative voice, Brontë enacts what Williams (1970) calls the "self-authoring" subject: a woman who constitutes herself through the act of narration. The famous apostrophe "Reader, I married him" (Brontë, 1847/2006, p. 517) simultaneously asserts agency over her own story and collapses the boundary between narrator and reader. Genette (1980) identifies such direct address as a form of metalepsis that draws attention to the act of narration itself, foregrounding Jane's status as a conscious, self-directing subject who owns her narrative entirely.

In *Vanity Fair*, by contrast, FID is deployed by a third-person narrator who maintains an ironic and sometimes adversarial relationship with Becky. Thackeray's narrator oscillates between proximity and detachment, entering Becky's consciousness sufficiently to convey her calculations and desires, then withdrawing to pass satirical judgment. This oscillation creates what Booth (1961) calls an "unreliable" but ideologically engaged narrator—one whose shifts in focalization are themselves a stylistic enactment of the novel's satirical project. Jane's first-person narration invites identification; Becky's FID, filtered through a judgmental narrator, invites simultaneous fascination and critical distance. As Cohn (1978) notes, these positions represent the poles of a spectrum of narrative intimacy, and the choice between them carries profound implications for how female subjectivity is constructed and evaluated.

Gothic Imagery, Satirical Imagery, and Structural Irony

Jane Eyre deploys an extensive Gothic symbolic repertoire—the red room, fire, ice, birds, the moon—that consistently functions as an externalization of Jane's inner psychological and moral states. As Showalter (1977) argues, the Gothic elements of *Jane Eyre* constitute a "female landscape" in which architecture, weather, and natural phenomena become allegories of female interiority and constraint. The red room episode is the novel's founding symbolic moment: Jane's imprisonment in the room where her uncle died constitutes a Gothic figure for female subjection that reverberates throughout the novel. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) observe that the red room symbolises simultaneously the patriarchal house and Jane's own repressed passion—a passion not fully released until Bertha Mason, Jane's symbolic double, burns Thornfield to the ground. Throughout, Gothic imagery internalizes and spiritualizes female experience, aligning Jane with a Romantic tradition in which landscape is the mirror of consciousness.

Vanity Fair's imagery system is satirical rather than Gothic. The novel's central symbolic cluster—the puppet show, the fair, the marketplace—frames social life as performance and commodity exchange. Women, in this symbolic framework, are simultaneously performers and commodities: objects of display whose value is determined by the market of social reputation. Particularly significant is Thackeray's deployment of siren and mermaid imagery associated with Becky. The illustration depicting Becky as a mermaid concealing a skeleton beneath the waves

encapsulates the novel's ambivalent construction of her femininity (Thackeray, 1848/2003, p. 617). As Peters (1987) argues, this imagery positions Becky within a long tradition of the femme fatale, yet Thackeray's treatment is more complex than simple condemnation.

Irony functions as a structural principle, not merely a local rhetorical effect, in *Vanity Fair*. Thackeray's subtitle "A Novel Without a Hero" (Thackeray, 1848/2003, p. 1) signals an ironic stance toward Victorian novel conventions. As Harden (1979) argues, the novel's pervasive irony is directed not only at its characters but at the society that produces them. Becky's career enacts the central satirical thesis: that the virtues Victorian society celebrates—domestic piety, feminine submission, moral purity—are performances available only to those who can afford them. As Pearce (1994) observes, Thackeray's double movement indicts both society and the individual who seeks to exploit it. Irony in *Jane Eyre*, by contrast, is a property of the heroine's own consciousness rather than the narrative apparatus. As Gezari (1992) argues, Jane's local deployment of irony against figures of gender authority represents a form of linguistic subversion that coexists with the novel's otherwise earnest moral framework.

Narrative Voice and the Politics of Female Self-Expression

The narrative voice—its distance from, proximity to, and moral relationship with the heroine—is perhaps the most encompassing stylistic choice in each novel. In *Jane Eyre*, narrator and protagonist are identical: Jane tells her own story in retrospect, giving the reader direct, unmediated access to her consciousness throughout. Heilman (1958) argues that this identity of narrator and protagonist produces a novel of unusual psychological depth but also unusual ideological commitment: Jane's narration is always also a moral argument, and the reader cannot access any perspective on events that Jane has not authorized.

In *Vanity Fair*, the narrator is emphatically not Becky. Thackeray's narrator is a knowing, socially embedded figure whose relationship to Becky is a complex mixture of admiration, condemnation, and identification—an identification Thackeray himself acknowledged in his correspondence (Ray, 1955). This dynamic produces a novel in which Becky is simultaneously the most vivid presence and the most consistently objectified: her interiority is available only when the narrator chooses to grant access, and that access is always mediated by satirical irony. As Armstrong (1987) argues, the question of who gets to narrate is one of the central political questions of the Victorian novel, and the contrast between *Jane Eyre* and *Vanity Fair* crystallizes that question with unusual sharpness.

CONCLUSION

The linguistic and stylistic analysis presented in this article demonstrates that the contrasting characterizations of Jane Eyre and Becky Sharp are encoded at the deepest levels of literary form. Jane's figurative speech—characterized by elemental metaphor, rhetorical antithesis, and the mapping of inner moral states onto natural imagery—constitutes a form of linguistic self-constitution: Jane speaks herself into existence as a moral and spiritual subject in defiance of social categories. Becky Sharp's figurative language, by contrast, operates through irony, strategic flattery, and the double-voiced deployment of social convention, simultaneously performing compliance with Victorian feminine norms and subverting them from within.

Jane's first-person narration enacts female self-authorship at the level of narrative structure; Becky's representation through a third-person ironic narrator withholds that self-authorship even as the character herself resists the social forces that constrain her. Gothic imagery in *Jane Eyre* spiritualizes and internalizes female experience; satirical imagery in *Vanity Fair* socializes and commodifies it. *Jane Eyre* represents an emergent model of female subjectivity grounded in moral autonomy and the right to self-narration; *Vanity Fair* represents a counter-model in which femininity is performance and strategic self-presentation within a social system that denies women legitimate power.

As Armstrong (1987) argues, the Victorian novel was one of the primary cultural instruments through which gendered subjectivities were produced and contested. The contrasting stylistic strategies of the two novels reflect and participate in the broader cultural negotiation of what it meant to be a woman in mid-Victorian England—a negotiation conducted not only in the realm of explicit ideology but in the most intimate details of narrative voice, figurative choice, and rhetorical structure. Any adequate account of the evolution of female characters in Victorian literature must attend to these linguistic and stylistic dimensions, for it is in the language itself that the ideological assumptions and contestations of Victorian culture are most revealingly encoded.

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