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## Art- A Triumph Over Neurosis:

An overview of Charlotte Brontë's selected novels, *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley* and *Villette* in the light of Karen Horney's theories of personality

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**Abstract:** *The paper provides an overview of the central characters in Charlotte Brontë's selected novels by applying Karen Horney's theories of personality. It highlights Brontë's ability to provide an insight into both the male and female psyche, particularly the empathy shown for characters suffering from "basic anxiety." While tracing the trajectory of Brontë's changing vision by connecting her life to the works, the paper concludes that the movement from fantasy to realism should not be seen as psychological regression but as a sign of her ability to come to grips with reality.*

The use of psychological theories for an interpretation of Charlotte Brontë's novels has always been a popular approach with critics. This is, primarily, because of the insight that her works offer into the conscious and unconscious working of a woman's mind – the absolute freedom with which her greatest yearnings, loves, and disappointments are discussed. Herbert Read believes that Charlotte Brontë's "introduced into English literature the very qualities of psychological observation and analysis" by which writers like Balzac and Stendhal had "instituted a new epoch in the literature of France." (Read 292) In an age in which novelists like Dickens, Thackeray, and even George Eliot to a certain extent were more concerned with producing critiques of society, Brontë wrote, as Patricia Beer comments of "individuals each with her own frustrations and her own solution to them." (Beer 88). Another critic, Ruth Yeazell while commenting on *Jane Eyre* feels that even the improbabilities in the novel may be explained as "the truth of the psyche" (Yeazell 128)

A major feature of the existing psychological criticism on Brontë is the use of the biographical approach in interpreting her novels. The intimacy of tone attained by the first-person narrative gives almost a "confessional" quality to her works and has often led critics to regard the central characters in all her novels as a projection of the novelist herself. As Arthur-Compton Rickett observes in his *A History of English Literature*, "We think mainly of the art of the story teller in reading *Pride and Prejudice*; we think primarily of the personality of the story teller in reading *Jane Eyre*." (Compton-Rickett 520) While the use of the biographical approach is certainly justified, we need to ensure that such a study does not become reductionistic. As John Maynard observes in his work *Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality*, "... from the earliest Freudian readings of Brontë .... to the more sophisticated studies of the past ten years, there has been a marked tendency to diminish Brontë's work into a mere personal expression of despair over her early traumatic experiences whether of sexual conflict or of loss and of rage at her role as a woman in a patriarchal society." (Maynard ix) Herbert Read, for example, talks of "the early rupture of the maternal bond of affection and protection, the intolerance of a stern, impassive father, the formation of inferiority complexes in the children and the consequent compensations by phantasy." (Read, *Collected Essays...* 283) Such studies are, sometimes, carried to great length as in detecting the presence of Brontë's brother and father in the characters of Rochester and St. John Rivers respectively, or while seeing in the novels the "neuroses of women in a man's society", displaying a desire for castration to wreak vengeance on men, and having "unquenchable urges to succeed", or at least to "expire under the burden of a masochistic duty."

(Gregor 25,26,20,21)<sup>1</sup> Some, merely, dismiss the novels as the daydreams of a thirty-year old virgin (Shapiro 362)<sup>2</sup>

There is also a general tendency to doubt Brontë's ability to depict male characters, a doubt that may have been fostered further by Brontë's remarks in a letter to James: "In delineating male character, I labour under disadvantages; intuition and theory will not adequately supply the place of observation and experience" (Showalter 133) Some critics believe that Brontë lacked the necessary emotional detachment to make a proper study of character. Even critics who laud Brontë's skill in characterisation often tend to ignore the male characters, or make only a perfunctory study of them, believing as David Cecil does that "her secondary characters are present only as they appear to Jane Eyre or Lucy Snowe", and therefore, turn out as "barest sketches compared with the elaborately finished portrait of the character through whose eyes we look at them." (Cecil 113)

The aim of the present paper is to alter or at least mitigate some of these impressions by analysing Brontë's major characters in the light of Karen Horney's theories of personality. Karen Horney's theories (specially her theory of "neurotic types") offer us a very comprehensive and cogent approach to an analysis of the leading characters in Brontë's novels, in contrast to the usual Freudian approaches which, generally, revolve around Oedipal themes, or view the novels, merely as vehicles for wish-fulfilment. Horney's contention is that "the relevant factor in the genesis of neurosis is ..... neither the Oedipus complex, nor any kind of infantile pleasure striving, but all those adverse influences which make a child feel helpless and defenceless and which make him conceive the world as potentially menacing" (Horney, *New Ways in Psychoanalysis* 9), which Horney labels "basic anxiety". To overcome this feeling of "basic anxiety", the child develops certain neurotic trends which can help him to cope with the world with some measure of safety.

Horney talks about three different parts of the self: the "actual" or "empirical" self, the "idealized" self and the "real" self. She defines the "actual" as "an all-inclusive term for everything that a person is at a given time: body and soul, healthy and neurotic"; the "idealized" self as "what we are in our irrational imagination or what we should be according to the dictates of neurotic pride", and the "real" self as "the original force toward individual growth and fulfillment, with which we may again achieve full identification when freed of the crippling shackles of neurosis". (Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth* 158). Horney states that "under inner stress, a person may become alienated from his real self", and transfer all their "energies to the task of moulding himself by a rigid system of inner dictates, into a being of absolute perfection", in order to "fulfill his idealized image of himself and satisfy his pride in the exalted attributes which (so he feels) he has, could have or should have." (Ibid. 13). Horney believes that while creating an "idealized" image of himself, a neurotic sees to it that "the conflicting parts were so transfigured that they no longer appeared as conflicts but as various aspects of a rich personality." (Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts* 16) She also believes that "of all the attempts at solution, the idealized image is probably the most important by reason of its far-reaching effect on the whole personality." (Ibid 17). This idealization begins with "his particular solution of his basic conflict; compliance becomes goodness; love, saintliness; aggressiveness becomes strength, leadership, heroism, omnipotence; aloofness becomes wisdom, self-sufficiency, independence." (*Neurosis and Human Growth*, 22). Based on this, Horney identifies three main types of personality - the "self-effacing", the "expansive" the resigned/"detached" type.

Brontë's (and her heroines') preoccupation with love can offer us a useful starting-point for an application of Horney's theories to her works. It is a factor for which Brontë was criticised heavily by people like Harriet Martineau who objected to the fact that "events and characters are to be regarded through the medium of one passion only." (Allott 76)<sup>3</sup> Martineau wrote to Brontë, concerning *Villette*, "I do not like the love, either the kind

<sup>1</sup> Richard Chase, "The Brontës: A Centennial Observance", *The Kenyon Review*, ix, no.4 (Autumn, 1947); rpt. in *The Brontës*, ed. Ian Gregor, 25 and 26.

Rosamond Langbridge, *Charlotte Brontë: A Psychological Study* as quoted by Richard Chase in "The Brontës: A Centennial Observance" in *The Brontës*, 20, 21.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Prescott, "Jane Eyre: A Romantic Exemplum with a difference" in *Twelve Original Essays on Great English Novels*, ed. Charles Shapiro (Detroit: Wayne Univ. Press, 1960) as reviewed by Marvin Mudrick, *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 15 (March 1961), 362

<sup>3</sup> Harriet Martineau, in *Daily News*, 3 Feb. 1853; rpt. in *Casebook*, ed. Miriam Allott, p.76.

or the degree of it.”(Maynard 4)<sup>4</sup> To which Brontë’s rejoinder was: “I know what love is as I understand it, and if man or woman should be ashamed of feeling such love, then is there nothing right, noble, faithful, truthful, unselfish in this earth”(Ibid 5), a fact already voiced by Caroline Helstone in *Shirley*: “... love is a divine virtue... when I see or hear either man or woman couple shame with love, I know their minds are coarse, their associations debased.”(Brontë 326) As John Maynard comments, it is interesting that Brontë here rises to defend not herself, but love.(Maynard 5) For her, love was the be-all and end-all of all existence. While Freud viewed this as a normal element in feminine psychology, Karen Horney sees such excessive dependence on love as a neurotic streak and labels characters who seek solutions for all their problems through love as the “self-effacing” type, a description which seems to fit Brontë in every sense of the term, both the psychological and the literal. An analysis of Brontë's heroines reveals that all of them (barring Shirley) fit into this category of neurotics.

The origin of the neurosis and the self-effacement tendencies in Brontë can be traced mainly to her self-consciousness about her looks. As one of Brontë's biographers, Winifred Gérin has commented, the plainness or what one of her friends, Mary Taylor termed the "ugliness" of her appearance gave rise to a deep-seated inferiority complex in her, and the need to be liked by others and to please others despite her lack of physical attractions became a compulsive drive with her, and is a recurring theme in her writings (Gérin 57). Jane is frequently self-conscious of being “poor, obscure, plain and little” (Brontë 240) and this awareness of possessing an unimpressible, dull exterior even assumes a morbid tone in *Villette*, becoming one of the chief causes of Lucy's depression and mental breakdown. Even a little kindness brought Brontë a great deal of happiness and readers of her novels are familiar with the deep sense of contentment that her heroines (specially, Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe) feel on being accepted by their fellow-beings, even if it be just a servant. Karen Horney tells us in *Neurosis and Human Growth* that one of the chief reasons for this is a neurotic's "deeply ingrained feeling of being unlovable" (299), and that this feeling is strongest in the "self-effacing" type. Winifred Gérin, in her book, *Charlotte Brontë: The Evolution of Genius* informs us that: "Not to be loved had been Charlotte's ultimate dread since childhood." (Gérin 286). She goes on to tell us that one of Brontë's nightmares during her school days, according to Mary Taylor was "the vision of her dead sisters, returned, but changed towards her; unloving and censorious," (Ibid.) which instantly brings to mind, Lucy Snowe's nightmare in *Villette*. The deprived and love-starved heroines, Jane Eyre, Caroline Helstone and Lucy the Snowe are perfect samples of the "self-effacing" type of personality. While the lack of external attractiveness has a strong part to play in the neuroses of Jane and Lucy, in Caroline's case, the main determinant is the need for security and affection. A very low degree of self-esteem acquired through early experiences, gives rise to submissive tendencies and a great craving for love that is seen as the source of satisfaction, peace, unity and the only means of self-realization.

Horney informs us that this conviction of unlovableness makes the "self-effacing" type determined to the "cultivate in himself likable qualities or at least appearance thereof." (*Neurosis and Human Growth* 299), which frequently brings all kinds of self-abnegating trends to the fore. Horney, rightly points out that this craving is not just the result of a desire for acceptance or security, but is seen by a self-effacing person as the only means of what he believes to be self-realization, "the only way to actualise his idealized self", for "in loving, he can develop to the full, the lovable attributes of his idealized self; in being loved, he obtains the supreme confirmation of it." (Ibid. 241). Thus, the "self-effacing" type of personality is in many ways, a deceptively altruistic one, and we find, at the core, a greater desire to be loved rather than to love; giving rise to morbid dependency on others. It is, probably, the egoistical nature of this desire for love which prompts John Kucich to comment that: "At its highest pitch, Brontëan desire never seeks to achieve union between two selves or to complete the self in the other", although one cannot agree with his contention that "Brontë's characters use others only as the friction necessary to a heightened inward dynamic of feeling." (Kucich 921)

Horney talks about the "self-effacing" type being "spell-bound" by certain types of people: "He is naturally attracted by a person of the same or opposite sex who impresses him as stronger and superior." (*Neurosis and Human Growth* 243) This, certainly explains the preference for masterful men displayed in Brontë's novels. Horney feels that the choice, either, falls on a healthy person or more often, on characters belonging to the "detached" type or the outgoing "narcissistic" type possessing self-assurance or the arrogant-vindictive" type - the last two falling under the category of neurotics who seek what Horney calls the "expansive"

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Charlotte Bronte as quoted by John Maynard, *Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality*, p.4

solution, with characteristics diametrically opposed to the "self-effacing" type. (Ibid.). Such persons, therefore, compel admiration from the "self-effacing" person, and also serve as a means of vicarious fulfilment by allowing him to "externalise"\* his own buried "expansive" drives. Elaine Showalter appears to corroborate this view when she comments on the heroes in nineteenth century novels by women that: "Their heroes are not so much their ideal lovers as their projected egos." (Showalter 136) Helene Moglen, too, appears to be forming a similar conjecture in her work, *Charlotte Brontë: The Self Conceived*, when she hints that Brontë gradually began to develop a sense of identity with the tormented, yet darkly energetic Byronic figure. (Gilbert *Victorian Studies* 264)<sup>5</sup> While the heroes do, partly, fulfil this role, an analysis of them in the light of Horney's theories will prove that they are fully developed characters in their own right.

Rochester, St. John Rivers, Robert Moore, Graham Bretton, Paul Emanuel and one of the heroines, Shirley fit into the description given by Horney of the "expansive" type of character. According to Horney, in the "expansive" solution, the individual identifies himself with his glorified self and believes in a mastery of life. To quote from Horney's *Neurosis and Human Growth*. "The appeal of life lies in its mastery. It chiefly entails his determination, conscious or unconscious to overcome every obstacle - in or outside himself and the belief that he should be able and infact, is able to do so. He should be able to master the adversities of fate, the difficulties of a situation, the intricacies of intellectual problems, the resistances of other people, conflicts in himself. The reverse side of the necessity for mastery is his dread of anything connoting helplessness; this is the most poignant dread he has." (192). Horney mentions three sub-types of the expansive" character - the "narcissistic", the "perfectionistic" and the "arrogant-vindictive" types while making it quite clear that these attributes are not always mutually exclusive. The only hero who does not fit into the "expansive" type is Louis Moore, who belongs to the "detached"/"resigned" type of character. As the name indicates, the "detached" or "resigned" person tends to move away from people, and also withdraws from the battlefield of life itself, placing a high premium on the independence and the semblance of peace that he gains thereby. All that he can manage, however, is to "immobilize" the conflicting forces (*Neurosis and Human Growth* 272), and shut out the conflicts from the conscious mind.

None of these solutions, infact, can help a person to achieve genuine peace of mind by setting the conflicts at rest, for they generally indicate only the main directions of development, and are rarely mutually exclusive. Brontë's heroines, while displaying self-abnegating trends, also display a fierce desire for independence, The heroes, similarly, display certain "self-effacing" trends. It is probably, because of this that Nina Auerbach feels compelled to conclude that: "The self is born in her novels out of a clash of extreme and opposing forces, and is rarely able to rest in the stability of a final synthesis." (Auerbach 328) This is a position that John Kucich also shares when he talks about Brontë "dissolving stable notions about self, identity and self-knowledge..." (Kucich 935).

According to Horney, another reason for conflict is the "idealized" self, which not only gives rise to compulsive drives within an individual, but "also becomes a measuring rod with which to measure his actual being" (p.110). This creates a feeling of "self-hate" for this actual being is such an embarrassing sight when viewed from the perspective of a godlike perfection that he cannot but despise it. (*Neurosis and Human Growth* 110). The "actual" self, therefore, becomes the "victim of the proud, idealized self." (Ibid. 112). We find the conflict overtly manifested in some of the heroines as a battle between "Reason" and "Feeling". Horney identifies two different kinds of conflicts within every neurotic: 1) Between "expansive" drives and "self-effacing" ones. 2) Between the whole pride system and the "real" self, which Horney labels as the "central inner conflict", which is a result of "self-hate" being "directed against the emerging constructive forces of the real self." (Ibid.).

The inflated image of self, acquired in childhood and later, plays a significant role in conditioning the behaviour of the "narcissistic" type, especially, of which we find ample evidence in Rochester, Shirley and Graham Bretton. Seemingly so different, Jane's dark, brooding employer, the vivacious, glamorous heiress and

\* Horney defines "externalisation" in *Our Inner Conflicts* as the process by which "inner processes are experienced as going on outside the self" -p.17.

<sup>5</sup> Helene Moglen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Self Conceived* (New York: Norton, 1976), as reviewed by Sandra M. Gilbert, *Victorian Studies*, 21, No. 2 (Winter 1978). 264.

the gentle, debonair doctor are all united by the streak of youthful buoyancy and charisma, and an open or concealed display of arrogance (or at least, vanity) and a well-concealed desire for universal admiration. The bitter experiences in later life have brought an element of vindictiveness or hostility into Rochester's character, giving him almost a misanthropical air at times, an air inimical to the image that we have of the "narcissistic" type. Frustration of early ambitions through economic disasters and loss of family prestige are the principal causes of neuroses in the case of St. John Rivers and Robert Moore. The "search for glory" combined with the "need for perfection" and "neurotic ambition", which Horney considers to be off-shoots of self-idealization, are specially in evidence in of St. John Rivers. On the other hand, "neurotic ambition" combined with the other element in the search for glory - the need for "vindictive triumph" are the driving forces in the case of Robert Moore. (*Neurosis and Human Growth* 24-26) While the circumstances affecting Robert might also have had an effect on his brother, Louis, the principal cause of Louis's neurosis is the isolation from his family, not just physically but psychologically because of his feeling of being a misfit, owing to his education, intellectual qualities and natural tastes. In his case, the chief driving force is the need to guard his inner freedom by cultivating a sense of detachment. And his natural passivity develops this into a drive towards "resignation". In Paul Emanuel, we have a combination of the "narcissistic", "perfectionistic" and "arrogant vindictive" types of character. While general adulation for his talents may have produced the first element, his religious convictions are principally responsible for the second, and the third may be a result of his bitter experiences in life, all of which combine to create a very volatile personality. The healthy impulses in his personality prevent him from going overboard, giving us one of the most childlike and lovable figures in Brontë's works.

While "neurotic pride" exists in all neurotics, a larger amount of it is present in those adopting the "expansive" solution, whereas it generally disappears from the conscious mind in those adopting the "self-effacing" solution. Self-hate exists in all neurotics, irrespective of the solution they adopt, and neurotic pride only reinforces the feeling of "self-hate" when a neurotic finds it difficult to live up to the demands of his "idealized" self. Horney, infact, believes that "Pride and self-hate belong inseparably together; they are two expressions of one process." (*Neurosis and Human Growth* 109) This accounts for the conflicting tendencies in all the characters. As Horney observes, neurosis brings about disturbances, not only with relation to others, but in "one's relation to self." (Ibid. 368) The buried streak of "expansiveness" created by "neurotic pride" in the "self-effacing" heroines is responsible for the desire for independence, and the sometimes, prejudiced and censorious remarks passed by them about the other characters. Precisely in keeping with Horney's contention, the choice falls on the outgoing "narcissistic" type of person or the "arrogant-vindictive" type of person who serve the heroines as a means of "externalising" their buried "expansive" drives. It is interesting to note that the choice does not fall on persons showing "self-effacing" tendencies or even "perfectionistic" tendencies (like St. John Rivers), for the self-abnegating tendencies in these people are seen as signs of weaknesses as they reflect the weaknesses that they despise within themselves.

This, along with the hidden nature of their neurotic claims, sometimes creates distortions in their perspective of the other characters. These, however, need not be taken as the authorial perspective, and it is possible to get a clear view of all the characters despite such subjective points of view. The battle between these conflicting trends in the heroines is often characterised in the novels as a battle between "Reason" and "Feeling". While self-hate rarely remains in the foreground or at the conscious level in the "expansive" type of character, a sense of insecurity, self-doubt and unlovableness, definitely, lingers below the surface and gives rise to a need for affection. The buried "self-effacing" tendencies in the "expansive" type are responsible for these masterful beings, sometimes, displaying a desire to be mastered (or, at least, resisted) which we find most markedly in the case of Rochester, Paul Emanuel and Shirley. Horney believes that in the "resigned" person, "neither expansive nor self-effacing trends seem to be suppressed." (Ibid 270) from the conscious mind, which is certainly proved in the case of Louis Moore.

"Self-esteem" and "self-hate" are not only determining factors in the development of neurosis, but they, also, play a significant role in the ability to overcome the neurosis. Unlike Freud, Horney believes that "inherent in man are evolutionary constructive forces which urge him to realize his given potentialities", and that a person can grow if he stops indulging in a "dark idolatry of self and stops attributing" his own shortcomings to the deficiencies of others" by assuming "responsibility for himself" (*Neurosis and Human Growth* 15). The ability to outgrow the neurosis depends, largely on the degree of "self-hate" and the existence of healthy "self-esteem" and other constructive forces present within an individual. Apart from individual. idiosyncrasies, it is these factors which create differences even in characters of the same type, and lessen the monotony of analysing them. For example, although Jane Eyre, Caroline Helstone and Lucy Snowe belong to the "self-effacing" type, what

stands out in the first two is their desire for love. In Lucy's case, what is more apparent is the repressive, self-frustrating, "shrinking" measures adopted by a neurotic of this type. What divides Lucy Snowe from the other two is the intensity of "self-hate" and the absence of powerful constructive forces within her, which would propel her to action. As Nina Auerbach puts it, although "Jane Eyre is a double character... she is not paralyzed by the divisions in her nature as Lucy Snowe will be." (Auerbach 330) Changes in external circumstances do help Lucy to come out of her neurosis for a while, but the sudden blow dealt by fate, again brings a relapse, and leaves us with the feeling that her neurosis has deepened.

Although love is a recurring theme in all three books, only characters who are able to overcome the neurosis are able to live together in total compatibility, as we find in the case of Jane Eyre and Rochester, and in a comparatively diminished form in the case of Caroline and Robert, and there is plenty of room for doubt about the harmony achieved by Shirley and Louis. Shirley frequently conveys the feeling that "Two people can never literally be as one." (Brontë *Shirley* 389) We do have one happy couple in *Villette* in the form of Graham Bretton and Paulina Mary. Paul Emanuel and Lucy Snowe, too, are able to outgrow their neurosis and find total harmony with each other. But their happiness is short-lived and Lucy is left alienated from others, with a strong sense of resignation. The romantic visionary's naive optimism, reflected in the idyllic picture of Jane and Rochester living together like Adam and Eve in Paradise, in perfect harmony with each other and with the whole of nature, is gradually on the wane, and restricted to a single day in the life of Paul and Lucy. One really wonders if Harriet Martineau was justified in criticising Brontë for the morbid craving for love expressed in *Villette*, for the real theme of the novel, as Winifred Gérin puts it, is not "love but loneliness...." (Gérin 495)

The changes in Brontë's vision are described very succinctly by Nina Auerbach: "The movement from Jane Eyre to *Villette* seems almost the movement of nineteenth century, which begins with Wordsworth's comforting sense of immanence linking man to the universe and ends with Hardy's vision of man, homeless in an alien landscape, creature of nature's mistake." (Auerbach 329) One may well find a link between these changes in her vision and Brontë's personal psychological condition. The disasters that Brontë suffered may be responsible for this growing sense of disillusionment with herself and the world, which culminates in the pessimistic ending of *Villette*. What Robert Colby says of Lucy, may perhaps, be equally applicable to Brontë: "Through most of her narrative, she makes us aware not only of divisiveness in her own soul, but of the shallowness, defectiveness, or limited spiritual endowments of most of those she meets." (Colby 416)

However, Brontë's personal discontent with herself and life seems to have given her the insight and empathy needed to acquire such a powerful grasp over the neurotic character. She is able to effectively reveal through her writings, if one may use Jane Eyre's words; "... how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth." (Brontë 101) As John Maynard aptly sums up, the movement from fantasy to realism could well be described as "a triumph of art and psychological understanding over the circumstances of her life and century." (Maynard ix)

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